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Isaac

SCIENCE FICTION

1.75 JULY 1983

MAGAZINE

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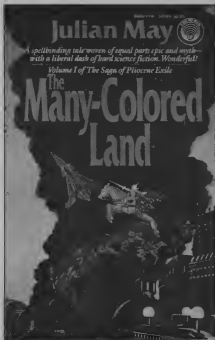
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MAGAZINE

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EDITORIAL



by Isaac Asimov

OUR OBSOLETE WORLD

I was interviewed recently on the telephone by a newspaper reporter and questioned on my views of science fiction. I spoke freely as I usually do. Inevitably, I was asked about the Foundation series and I explained that it was a historical novel of the future. I talked about the concern of the series with the fall and rise of empires, and she at once pointed out the similarity to historical events in the past. I said, "Of course. That's deliberate."

Why, then, asked she, was it necessary to make a science fiction story out of it and place the events in the far future.

And, according to the newspaper article when it appeared, my answer was that "you can't write about the here and now; we're living in a world that is obsolete."

I don't remember saying that (I never remember what I say to reporters), but I'm sure I did because it sounds exactly like what I would say under such circumstances. After all, the world we live in *is* obsolete.

It is not an unusual situation.

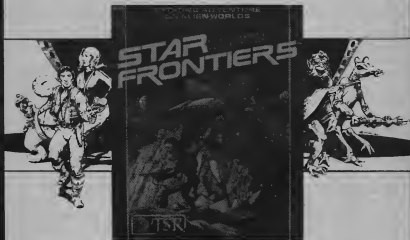
It seems to me that throughout history, the human world has been a patchwork of obsolescence. The human situation alters, usually as a result of the introduction of technological changes, and human social institutions and psychological attitudes do not change as fast or—sometimes—at all. When that happens, obsolescence sets in.

Any society which clings to tradition and eschews change is certain to be obsolescent and, as a result, to suffer at the hands of neighboring societies that do change, even if slowly. The suffering that obsolescence entails is usually military in nature, but it might be economic and be just as effective.

Nor is the resistance to change necessarily that of mere inertia or stupidity. It is sometimes the result of prolonged success and the feeling that the one way to be assured of continued success is to "not break up a winning team."

Egypt clung stubbornly to tradition after its period as the most powerful empire in the

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world and, as a result, it became obsolete in the 13th century B.C., moved into the backwater of history, and lost control of its own destinies for over two thousand years. China became obsolete in the 15th century when, out of self-satisfaction with its success as the largest and most advanced nation within its horizons, it refused to take advantage of its technological preeminence to develop a gunpowder-based military machine and worldwide sea-exploration. (I don't judge this a morally bad attitude, merely an obsolete one.) It suffered a five-century eclipse as a result.

The ancient Greek world produced two centuries of matchless genius and success between 530 B.C. and 330 B.C., and a golden glow hovers about its memory still. In part this was the result of the institution of the city-state, which introduced tremendous variety and competition, and produced an extremely complex and subtle culture through endless interplay of differing customs and attitudes under the umbrella of a common language and literature.

The competition, however, was in part military, and while this developed military equipment and tactics that were far in advance of the larger nations that surrounded the city-states, it also made it impossible for

the city-states to unite against a common enemy. Eventually, it was inevitable that the Greek military techniques be adopted by some nearby nation that was not a city-state. The semi-Greek nation Macedon, under Philip II, was the first, and from that moment on the Greek city-states were obsolete.

Nor did the city-states recognize this. They clung to their traditional "liberties" (that is, the liberty to fight their neighbors and to indulge in civil war between such fights) and, as a result, they lost control of their own destiny and never regained it in city-state form.

Of course, it's easy to look back with the advantage of hindsight and sneer at them for not seeing the obvious facts of the situation. Yet even hindsight doesn't help, for when the chance arises in history to take advantage of the lessons taught by the past, it is rarely seized.

In the 15th century, northern Italy was a congeries of city-states which, like those of ancient Greece, produced a high culture that led the world and was, in fact, second only to that of the Greeks in their golden age. Yet they would never unite either, but clung to their separatism in the face of the growing power of the large nations about them, so that they went down to common ruin at the hands of the invading French, Germans, and Spaniards in the 16th century.

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In the 19th century, Europe was the mistress of the world. On a much larger scale, the European nations were the "city-states" who fought each other endlessly and developed military techniques that left the larger, but militarily primitive, nations of what we now call the "third world" helpless before them.

In the 20th century, however, European nations continued to fight each other ever more intensely and furiously, even while larger political units were developing and, in some cases, improving on European technology. After 1900, Europe was obsolete and didn't know it, and the result is that the European nations now carry on a cautious and uncomfortable existence in the shadow of the two competing "superpowers," the United States and the Soviet Union.

The danger of obsolescence has grown steadily greater through the centuries, however, for two reasons that are interrelated.

First, and basic, the changes introduced by advancing technology have become steadily more intense in nature, and follow each other more rapidly. The result is that it becomes ever more difficult for social and economic institutions, to say nothing of tradition and of psychology, to match those changes. There is therefore a growing inappropriateness in

the responses evoked by problems that arise.

Second, as a result of the advancing technology, the world has grown effectively smaller, more interrelated sociologically and economically, while the power of humanity to effect destruction has steadily increased. The destructive potential now far surpasses the somewhat (but by no means equally) increased power to rebuild after destruction.

When you combine the growing inappropriateness of response with the damage that such inappropriateness can do if matters come to any attempt at a military solution, it isn't hard to see that for the first time in history, we stand at the point where obsolescence can be fatal to civilization in a world-wide sense, and perhaps permanently.

In what way is our world obsolete?

First, tradition seems to blind us to the fact that it no longer makes sense to divide the world into separate nations, each of which thinks that its own "national security" justifies *any* action, no matter how dangerous to humanity as a whole. (This is analogous to the manner in which each Greek city-state considered its own interests only, without regard to Greek civilization as a whole; or Italian city-states without regard to Italy as a whole; or

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European nations without regard to Europe as a whole.)

Second, tradition seems to blind us to the fact that our population has grown too great, our technology too complex, to be supported by Earth alone. We think that because Earth's resources were *once* so great in comparison to human needs that those resources could be considered limitless—that they therefore still are.

As long as we possess these two traditional views, our society is not only obsolete, but dangerously so, and we stand on the brink of total disaster.

How must we change?

Clearly, we must recognize that it makes no sense for humanity to deal with the Universe in any way but as a social and economic whole. We are Earthpeople and nothing less. The fact that we feel ourselves to be Americans, Russians, Paraguayans, Nigerians, Pakistanians, etc. is irrelevant. It is a feeling we cannot indulge, but one we *must* violate for the sake of survival. Or let me put it this way: we can feel whatever local allegiances we want to, as long as it is recognized that they must bow to planetary needs, just as local rights within the United States today (my Manhattan patriotism, for instance) must bow to national needs—something all Americans casually accept.

Again, we must recognize that

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the human range must extend beyond Earth. We must move outward into space in search for new sources of both energy and materials, in order to release human pressures on the biosphere which are, today, steadily overweighting it and threatening the viability of the planet itself.

These two fundamental changes are interrelated since it may well be that space can be successfully conquered only

through a global effort, and that only the successful establishment of a space-centered civilization will give the final impetus required for the ultimate triumph of a global consciousness.

In science-fiction stories, both these changes are commonly taken for granted, and *that* is the importance of saying what I have to say in a science fictional context, rather than in the here-and-now. ●

ASIMOV Isaac **SCIENCE FICTION** MAGAZINE

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(Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, February 15, 1982)

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A LETTER FROM THE CLEARYS

Connie Willis

(Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, July 1982)

LETTERS

Sir:

I don't propose to get into a lengthy debate on this subject, but I do grow weary of people imputing to me motives and intentions I don't have. In this day and age, it is not fashionable to defend the proposition that "He who would have peace, let him be prepared for war"; but it is nevertheless an arguable proposition.

It is even less fashionable to defend the use of violence, although I do note that few mugging victims begrudge the police their nightsticks.

I write a column for *Survive Magazine*; my theme has always been the same, that the most important threat to our survival is nuclear war, and by all odds the best way to survive a nuclear war is not to have one. We can differ in how not to have one; in my judgment, presenting an aggressive and expansionist power with an opportunity for a clean win and mastery of the world is to risk the very nuclear war everyone agrees we should avoid.

There are also the terms under which we are to live: in Czechoslovakia recently a grocery clerk was sentenced to five years at hard labor for possession of an unlicensed mimeograph machine. I

wonder how many *IASfm* fans would care to live under those conditions?

As to violence: one fact is clear. The Third Reich didn't just go away. It wasn't removed by negotiations, and indeed there are very many who believe that the Munich concessions (after Chamberlain had mobilized the British Fleet and scared the Wehrmacht into planning a coup against Hitler) insured the Reich's survival and the consequent construction of Auschwitz.

The Reich didn't go away: it was pulled down through the expenditure of much American and Russian blood and treasure. Similarly, Viet Nam didn't fall to any guerrillas; after 1970 there were only a handful of genuine Viet Cong left. The Republic of Viet Nam fell to four North Vietnamese army corps, with more troops and tanks than the Wehrmacht used against France in 1940.

Final example: Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia. The violence there seems to have settled the fate of an awful lot of people; people I think we'd be more concerned about if they were white.

A couple of British and French divisions expending a handful of cartridges could have prevented World War II when the Germans marched into the Rhineland. One US Air Cavalry regiment stopped

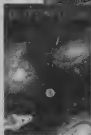
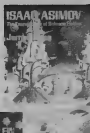
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the first North Vietnamese invasion in 1972. Only a fool would make violence his only means of persuasion; but in this imperfect world, in my judgment only the incompetent rule out the use of force until there is no other means of persuasion left.

Jerry Pournelle

Now, now, Jerry, it is possible you are too young to remember living through Munich as I did. Chamberlain and Co. saw Nazi Germany as a staunch defense of Europe against Communism and did not want to weaken Hitler and thus allow Stalin to take over. So they appeased the Nazis and finally had to resort to the last refuge of the incompetent. I don't say that violence isn't necessary sometimes. I just say it becomes necessary if you are not competent.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Your theory about Mr. Spock's ears attracting women readers to science fiction is purest malarkey. Few trekkies—men or women — "leaked over into print science fiction" because although *Star Trek* may have been the best science fiction on TV, it was lousy science fiction. Your women readers came from the *reading* public—just as the men did. I began reading science fiction in junior high school when I discovered Paul French's Lucky Starr books. The library didn't have a complete set, and I didn't know then that I could have found a lot more under "A," but over the new few years I did discover Heinlein, Bradbury, Norton,

and *Analog*, and was introduced to Harry Harrison in person by a friend who sold him a story.

The point is that long before sci-fi came to TV, a lot of young women knew that these authors wrote fabulous adventure stories chock full of handsome, resourceful young heroes who could go anywhere and endure anything. They beat the hell out of the callow, pimply-faced boys in class!

But not everyone was looking for a romantic interest. In those days girls still wore dresses to school, and were not permitted to take shop classes, even if it occurred to us to buck the system. Ann Landers was still telling us that good girls said "no," and I vividly remember one sex-education class that convinced me that open-mouthed kissing was something no decent person engaged in! Circumscribed in our choice of activities, and every bit as innocent as our male counterparts, I suspect that a large number of girls must have identified with those male heroes very much as the boys did.

Remember, too, that women scholars were aggressively channelled away from hard science and into the humanistic studies. Probably the big shift in readership began when writers like the author of the Foundation Trilogy realized that detailed and carefully thought-out sociology was as applicable to science fiction as was technological gadgetry. And with more and more writers using the ever-popular medieval setting in which science fiction overlaps sword-and-sorcery fantasy, you sucked in a lot of English majors. After all, Sir Thomas Malory hasn't written a sequel in

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As more women enter the hard sciences, technological gadgetry will become more familiar and less forbidding. Your female readers will certainly stay. But you are indeed an old-fashioned, closed-minded male chauvinist if you cling to the misapprehension that they come — or ever came — from the TV audience. They are *readers*—bright, intellectual, with their brains engaged and their imaginations going full blast—just like the men.

Mr. Spock's ears, indeed!

Sandra Dutky
4472 Georgia St.
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I don't for one minute say all women came into science fiction by way of Mr. Spock's ears, but I've been to Star Trek conventions, and if some thousands of them didn't come in that way then it doesn't rain in Indianapolis in the summer time.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor,

As a loyal reader of *IASfm* since the third issue appeared in the fall of 1977, I have found that the recent innovations to *IASfm* have improved the quality and appeal of your magazine. In particular, I find the Profiles and Viewpoints column interesting and I usually peruse this section first. I also enjoy doing the crossword puzzle and Mooney's Module is a delightful addition.

On the negative side, I feel that

the two-page review of current SF-related and role playing games column is out-of-place and many of the trade magazines which specialize in games are much better sources for SF-related games. In the January 1983 issue, you indicated that the "Up Front" column would be discontinued to reserve one more page for fiction. Why not devote three more pages to fiction and insert the games column on occasions. Incidentally, you devoted three full pages of the January issue to role-game advertisement. I would prefer to see more science fact articles since they would help the reader to understand and appreciate the science in the stories.

I have just finished reading the good Doctor's new novel *Foundation's Edge* and would like to congratulate him on a superb job, worthy of a Hugo. I am anxiously waiting for a sequel and hope that the waiting period will be shorter this time.

Sincerely,

William J. Halm
West Franklin, NH

Consider that three out of four isn't bad—especially when the judgment is by someone with good taste (witness that last bit.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear *IASfm* Editors,

Why so little fiction in some issues? The January '83 issue, which I've just finished, was especially disappointing in this respect. "Pilgrimage" and "Fusing and Refusing" were the only fully satisfying stories. "Things That Go Quack in

the Night" and "Concerto in B Demolished" were so-so, but "Shaggy Purple" and "The Seventeen-Year Locusts" are poor excuses for fiction. "Shaggy Purple" presents an intriguing idea, but the idea goes undeveloped while focus is placed on a meaningless professional rivalry; as for the "Locusts," I assume this was not intended as fiction.

I am a tolerant person who will read anything that is written well, but my preference is for good science fiction. Could we have more of it in future issues?

Best wishes,

Shelia M. Wildes
Hampton, VA

We do our best. Honest. It is hard, though, to get a unanimous vote and everything is bound to be disliked by somebody.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov & Shawna McCarthy:

Between teaching, going to college for another teaching credential, and making stained glass as a business, I still manage to find time to read your science fiction magazine.

Now to my dilemma. I began to subscribe to your magazine in spring of 1980, March to be precise. During the ensuing years, I have become very fond of the magazine, and have come to know George (who has since moved on), Shawna, and the good Doctor as members of a science fiction family. I have watched Shawna grow from Associate Editor, to Senior Editor, to Editor over the years.

I wander from my dilemma. Since those early days, I have tried to find all of the earlier issues of the magazine. I have visited many of the used book stores between Santa Maria and Willits, California, 400 miles in search of the older editions. To date, I am missing only 6 issues.

Now to the question. Does your magazine company have a magazine swap, or a used book sale club? It should be considered for those unfortunate people who are just now getting to know your great magazine.

I just recently finished reading Barry Longyear's "Enemy Mine," in the September 1979 issue. What a fantastic story! At this point I am only missing the four quarterly issues of 1977, and the June and July issue of 1979. Any suggestions? Do you have any old issues in your files?

I'll be interested in your reply, or any comments from your readers.

John Folsom
Covelo, CA

The trouble is I think no one with any issues of the magazine would want to give them up. If, however, you attend science fiction conventions, there are always back number magazines for sale and you may be in luck.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Ms. McCarthy:

You asked for input regarding a new game-playing review feature. My vote is this: I strongly resent ANYTHING in Asimov Science Fiction magazine other than sci-

ence fiction. I rate science fiction magazines by how far into each issue I have to turn before finding any science fiction to read—no doubt an archaic idea these days. With your first issue, January 1983, that was page 53—pretty bad! I hope you do better in coming issues. It is futile, I suppose, to hope that you might reverse the present trend toward making science fiction magazines everything to everyone, rather than magazines of science fiction.

F. A. Barnes
Moab, UT

The only thing better than science fiction, in my opinion, is a bit of variety. However, we try not to lose sight of our chief (if not our only) purpose.

—Isaac Asimov

Sirs:

I would like to thank you for the excellent profile of Dr. Pournelle (*IASfm*, Mid-Dec.). Dr. Pournelle is a very interesting man, and I am pleased to see a more systematic view of him than that afforded by the occasional conversation held at the LASFS.

As to the question between Drs. Asimov and Pournelle, as to whether violence is the last refuge of the incompetent, may I say, I would that it were! If the incompetent were to try other things first, they might find the results more acceptable than the results of violence. The problem is that violence is the first refuge of the incompetent!

Sincerely,

Charles Curley
Santa Rosa, CA

It depends on how incompetent one is. If one is very incompetent then one tries it first, but in that case it is the only refuge and therefore the first and the last, so the rule still holds. Remember, too, the remark "all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." That's not one of my own aphorisms. You'll find it in Matthew 26:52.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Shawna:

I just received my January '83 copy of *IASfm* and CONGRATULATIONS!! HALLELUJAH!! PRAISE THE MYSTIC EYE OF THE TWENTY-SEVENTH FLAMING CIRCLE!!! I have only read the first two paragraphs of the UP FRONT feature and I am already writing my third letter in my life to a magazine. When I informed my wife that you were now in charge, she admitted that she had stopped reading *IASfm* but now looked forward to starting again. I had not stopped, but I was very disappointed. As far as I was concerned, you should have had the position from the start. So . . . GIVE 'EM HELL AND MAKE 'EM SPELL

G.R. Shelley
California, MO

That's the way Shawna affects some people. Now let's everyone combine and try to get her to stop smoking.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Shawna,

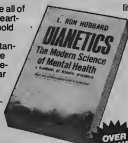
I follow Asimov's magazine regularly. It has an excellent balance

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between fiction, non-fiction and features. Is well illustrated and printed in a readable typeface, all pluses. One of my primary reasons for writing is my continuing enjoyment of the profiles of literary figures by Charles Platt. His special approach in trying to convey the personality and human physical and psychological circumstances of his subjects has been very successful. He appears, at least to me, to work very hard for objectivity even when it goes against the grain. In the process, he frequently makes clear cloudy or little known aspects of those profiled, which sheds considerable illumination on their work. Perhaps one of the reasons for his success, in this respect, is that he personally visits so many of his subjects.

One of the most revealing of his profiles was that of William Burroughs, which, in relatively short span, brought that strange dabbler

in science fiction symbols into focus. He seemed to be having a more difficult time with his profile of Jerry Pournelle. I had the feeling he was encountering a personality he couldn't quite relate to or get inside of and really had to work at making the elements of his interview coalesce. I will look forward to his *Dream Makers II* and hope that the publisher will deign to select a type for it large enough so that us older readers can dispense with the magnifying glass.

Sincerely yours,

Sam Moskowitz
Newark, NJ

Thank you, Sam. When we first became friends 43 years ago (not bad for two kids a little over thirty each) who thought that you and I would someday be revered elder statesmen in the field. And at such a young age, too!

—Isaac Asimov

MARTIN GARDNER

THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST



Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six.

Revelation 13:18

When the year 1000 approached there was a vast outpouring throughout the Christian world of sermons and literature dealing with the approaching appearance of the Antichrist, the Battle of Armageddon, and the Second Coming of Jesus. Now as the year 2000 looms ahead, it is happening again. Adventist sects are growing rapidly, and the electronic evangelists, including Billy Graham, are talking more and more about Satan's coming incarnation as the Beast, and how the number 666 will apply to the archfiend.

Being curious about how this trend will fare in the eighties and nineties, I put myself into a precognitive trance, using a secret technique developed last year by parascientists at Stanford Research International. The information obtained was as astonishing as it was bizarre.

Hysteria about the Second Coming reached a crescendo in 1999, and not just because this was the last year before 2000. If you turn 1999 upside down, its numerals begin with 666. But there were other reasons for the excitement. It was in June 1999, the sixth month of the year, that the Reverend Sun Moon announced that he was the new messiah. By that time the Moon cult had become the largest adventist sect in America, far surpassing in numbers and wealth the Mormons, the Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

In past centuries thousands of political and religious leaders have been identified with the Beast. The number 666 was usually derived from their name by numbering the letters of an alphabet in a plausible way, then adding the values of the letters in the person's name to obtain a sum of 666. Early Christians applied 666 in this way to Nero, other Roman tyrants, and Mohammed. Protestants applied it constantly to the names of popes, and Catholics retaliated by finding 666 in the names of Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers. It was applied to Napoleon, and later to Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and other dictators.

One elegant way to get 666 from HITLER is to use the simple code: A = 100, B = 101, C = 102, and so on. Adding the letters of HITLER produces 666.

I was startled to learn, in my trance, that in July 1999 I published in *IAsfm* a discovery I had made earlier that year. It used the simplest of all codes: A = 1, B = 2, C = 3, and so on. The value of each letter in a name is then multiplied by 6 and the products added. When this system is applied to SUN MOON the result is 666. Publishing this aroused such hostility on the part of the Moonies that for months I was bitterly attacked in their press, and even narrowly missed being killed by a crazed Moonie who, fortunately, was a poor shot with her revolver.

After emerging from my trance, I went carefully through my extensive files on 666. It occurred to me that readers of *IAsfm* might be interested not only in what I had precognized, but also in a few of the remarkable properties of 666.

Six raised to the sixth power, and that number again raised to the sixth power, gives the number of alternate universes that can be entered by the device in Robert Heinlein's recent novel, *The Number of the Beast*.

The sum of the first 36 counting numbers is 666, and note that $36 = 6 \times 6$.

The sum of the squares of the first 7 prime numbers

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(3,5,7,11,13,17,19) is 666. Note how this joins 666 to the mystical number 7.

The first 144 decimal digits of pi, Michael Steuben (a mathematics teacher in Annandale, VA.) recently found, add to 666. Note that 144 is $(6 + 6) \times (6 + 6)$.

$$1^3 + 2^3 + 3^3 + 4^3 + 5^3 + 6^3 + 5^3 + 4^3 + 3^3 + 2^3 + 1^3 = 666.$$

$$1^6 + 2^6 + 3^6 = 666.$$

$$6 + 6 + 6 + 6^3 + 6^3 + 6^3 = 666.$$

The next verse of Revelation after 13:18 is 14:1. It contains the number 144,000. Michael Keith, of Hightstown, NJ, discovered that if you divide 144,000 by 666 you get the repeating decimal number 216.216216216. . . , and $216 = 6 \times 6 \times 6$.

I could go on for 66 more pages, but there is space only for five pleasant puzzles:

1. Using the code that was applied to Hitler, what is the most evil day of the week?

2. Prove that the Beast is a FOX.

3. Three plus signs can be inserted within the sequence 123456789 to make a sum of 666:

$$123 + 456 + 78 + 9 = 666.$$

If minus signs are also allowed (except that a minus sign is not permitted in front of the sequence), what is the only other way to obtain 666 with just three signs? The sum cannot be achieved with fewer signs.

4. Find the only way to insert four signs (each may be plus or minus) inside 987654321 to make a sum of 666. Again, there is no solution with fewer signs.

5. A common interpretation among today's fundamentalists is that 666 represents a falling short of 777, which is taken to be a symbol of perfection. I believe there is no way to insert any number of plus and minus signs in 123456789 to get a sum of 777, and just one way to do it with 987654321. How?

To persuade readers to work on the last three questions, rather than turn to the solution page, I will not give their answers until next month. I would, however, be pleased to hear from any readers who may write computer programs that will find all ways of obtaining 666 and 777 by inserting plus and minus signs inside both ascending and descending sequences, and allowing a minus sign to precede the sequence.

For the answer to the first two questions, turn to page 62.

GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

Call of Cthulhu is unusual, even for a role-playing game. It's also been an instant hit with gamers, winning two awards in 1982—an H.G. Wells for "Best Role-Playing Game" and one from the Game Designers' Guild. (The former is similar to a Hugo, while the latter is equivalent to a Nebula.)

Chaosium Inc. (Box 6302, Albany, CA 94706) publishes the game, which is based on the gothic horror novels of H.P. Lovecraft. The Cthulhu mythos is complicated, but the legend basically maintains that this world was once inhabited by another race that practiced black magic. Because of this, it was expelled, but remains "outside," ever ready to take possession of Earth again.

The game takes place in America during the 1920s. A cult of Cthulhu worshippers still exists secretly, and its members call on the evil deities and alien races for eternal life, among other things. Human sacrifice is often needed, and even entire small towns have mysteriously "disappeared." The Cthulhu demons are so hideous they can cause a person to go insane just seeing them.

To start the game, each player chooses a role of an investigator, such as a journalist, a professor, a historian, or a private detective. Each player then rolls dice to determine his or her character's nine attributes: strength, constitution, size, intelligence, power, dexterity, charisma, education, and sanity.

These number values for attributes are used at the appropriate time in the game. For example, upon viewing a Cthulhu monster, you would roll dice to keep your sanity. If your roll is successful, you don't go insane, but you lose a point from your sanity value. Failing this dice roll usually means a great loss of sanity points. Once your character hits zero, he's incurably insane and out of the game.

The weapons at your disposal are pistols, rifles, shotguns, and, if you want to risk arrest for illegal firearms, submachineguns. There are no magic swords, no magic spells, no laser rifles, nor any nuclear grenades. In short, players have no super-human powers at their disposal; the intrepid investigators are just average Ameri-

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cans of the 1920s. This is one of the key elements that make *Call of Cthulhu* so different from other role-playing games.

The rules advise you not to become too attached to a character you create. Since you're not a powerful wizard or Conan-type warrior, there's a good chance you'll go insane or be killed by the cultists or their evil demons. Only your skill as an investigator, some cleverness—and maybe a .38 pistol and a little luck—stand between you and disaster.

A game session is called an adventure, and is basically the outline of a story. Unlike a novel, the plot of the adventure is unfinished—it will be filled in by the player-investigators as they play the game. A good adventure involves three players and a referee; having more players tends to make game-play slow and cumbersome; having two players would be okay, but not optimum.

Call of Cthulhu comes with

a world reference map showing suspected Cthulhoid locations, as well as actual archaeological sites, a pad of character sheets to keep track of a player's current status, six polyhedral dice, and three booklets. The booklets include the 16-page *Basic Role-Playing* introduction and basic rules (written expressly for people without any experience with these games); the 98-page rules book covering characters, encounters, monsters, the mythos, and six starter scenarios; and the 32-page *Sourcebook for the 1920s* of background information on the period for the referee.

There are also 21 cardboard cut-out figures for three-dimensional effect, although most gamers prefer to use metal miniatures to represent their characters and the monsters in an adventure. The official, and very creative metal figures for *Cthulhu* are produced by Grenadier Models Inc. (Box 305, Springfield, PA 19064). ●



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JAWBREAKERS

ACROSS

- 1 Mr. Peepers of TV
- 4 Composer Vaughan Williams
- 9 Nabokov novel
- 12 "The Wizard —"
- 14 Over and out, over in Oahu
- 15 Give the antidote
- 17 Watchdog for watchdogs?
- 18 Swift horses
- 20 — purposes
- 22 Smith
- 23 Indian mulberries
- 24 Milan opera house (with La)
- 28 Sooner than, years ago
- 29 Davidson
- 30 Frightening flies
- 32 Baseball award, for short
- 33 Piers Anthony novel
- 34 Arthur of the court
- 36 Dancing girl
- 37 Chichen- —, old Mayan city
- 41 — -Vision, early movie gimmick
- 43 Bone of contention in "Road Warrior"
- 44 Van Vogt's "The Book —"
- 46 In the middle of
- 48 USC acquisition, perhaps
- 49 IAsfm installment
- 51 Long dress
- 52 Paddled
- 54 "Oh, quit that!"
- 57 He was a great irritant to Superman
- 61 — Romeo
- 62 Captain Hook's henchman

- 63 Like a miffed lion
- 64 Godzilla had one
- 65 Chaney and Fairbanks, e.g.
- 66 Places for orators
- 67 Knight takes pawn, notatively

DOWN

- 1 — Nostra
- 2 Niven's "World —"
- 3 Clark Ashton Smith anthology
- 4 Sis-boom-bah followers
- 5 At —
- 6 Grant from TV
- 7 A sci.
- 8 "Like fun!"
- 9 Sign of otitis
- 10 Peckinpah's "Major —"
- 11 Sword-and-sorcery features
- 13 "Our Gang" cutie
- 16 The end of coal and lumin
- 19 Peachy keen
- 21 Operating-Safety Manual: abbr.
- 25 Lovecraft's Mythos
- 26 The Jetsons' dog
- 27 Biblical prophet
- 29 Docs' group
- 31 — Lanka
- 33 Knocks on a door with a club
- 35 Mental gift in "Scanners"
- 36 "Is — tough as he looks?"
- 38 Castaneda's "Journey —"
- 39 Baum's "Queen —" (an Oz novel)
- 40 Pilot's concern: abbr.

42 Charley Weaver's hometown

44 Coat —

45 "Riverworld" chronicler

46 Opp. of yday.

47 Attended

48 Some PTA members

50 Chou —

53 Former spouses

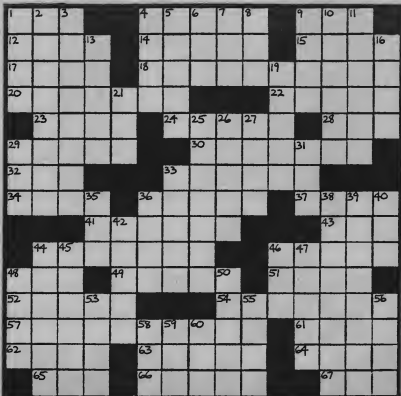
55 Gumbo ingredient

56 Vulnerable part of a giant ant
in "Them!"

58 Laser blast

59 Expert

60 "Dracula" director Browning





LA REINE BLANCHE

art: D. Della Ratta

by Tanith Lee

This prolific English author has been writing since the age of nine in a wide variety of fields. In addition to her work in science fiction and fantasy, she's written for the BBC, composed songs and poetry, and written books for children. The sequel to her epic fantasy, *Storm Lords*, is entitled *Anacklre*, and will be out shortly from DAW Books.

The white queen lived in a pale tower, high in a shadowy garden. She had been shut in there three days after the death of her husband, the king. Such a fate was traditional for certain of the royal widows. All about, between the dark verdures of the dark garden, there stared up similar pale towers in which similar white queens had, for centuries, been immured. Most of the prisoners were by now deceased. Occasionally, travelers on the road beneath claimed to have glimpsed—or to have thought that they glimpsed—a dim skeletal shape or two, in senile disarray, peering blindly from the tall narrow windows, which were all the windows these towers possessed, over the heads of the trees, towards the distant spires of the city.

The latest white queen, however, was young. She was just twenty on the day she wed the king, who was one hundred and two years of age. He had been expected to thrive at least for a further decade, and he had left off marrying until absolutely necessary. But he had gone livid merely on seeing her. Then, on the night of the nuptial, stumbling on his wife's pearl-sewn slippers lying discarded in the boudoir—symbol of joys to come—the king was overwhelmed. He expired an hour later, not even at the nude feet of his wife, only at the foot of the bridal bed. Virgin, wife, and widow, the young queen was adorned in a gown whiter than milk, and on her head, milk-white-coiffed like that of a nun, was placed the Alabaster Crown of mourning. With a long-stemmed white rose in her hand, she was permitted to follow her husband's bier to the mausoleum. Afterwards, she was taken by torchlight to the shadowy garden beyond the city, and conducted into a vacant tower. It contained a suite of rooms, unmistakably regal, but nevertheless bare. She was to commune with no one, and would be served invisibly. Such things as she might need—food and wine, fuel, clean linen—were to be brought by hidden ways and left for her in caskets and baskets that a pulley device would



raise and lower at a touch of her fingers.

Here then, and in this way, she would now live until she died.

A year passed. It might have been fifty. Spring and summer and autumn eschewed the garden, scarcely dusting it with their colors. The shadow trees did not change. The only cold stone blossoms the garden had ever put forth were the towers themselves. When winter began, not even then did the trees alter. But eventually the snow came. Finding the unaltered garden, the snow at last covered it and made it as white as the gown of the young queen.

She stood in her window, watching the snow. Nothing else was to be seen, save the low, mauvened sky. Then a black snow-flake fell out of the sky. It came down in the embrasure of the window. A raven looked at the young queen through the glass of her casement. He was blacker than midnight, so vividly different that he startled her and she took half a step away.

"Gentle Blanche," said the raven, "have pity, and let me come in."

The white queen closed her eyes.

"How is it you can speak?" she cried.

"How is it," said the raven, "you can understand what I say?"

The white queen opened her eyes. She went back to the narrow window pane.

"The winter is my enemy," said the raven. "He pursues me like death or old age, a murderer with a sword. Fair Blanche, shelter me."

Half afraid, half unable to help herself, the white queen undid the window catch and the terrible cold thrust through and breathed on the room. Then the raven flew in, and the window was shut.

The raven seated himself before the hearth like a fire-dog of jet.

"My thanks," he said.

The white queen brought him a dish of wine and some cold meat left on the bone.

"My thanks again," said the raven. He ate and drank tidily.

The white queen, seated in her chair, watched him in awe and in silence.



When the raven had finished his meal, he arranged his feathers. His eyes were black, and his beak like a black dagger. He was altogether so black, the white queen imagined he must be as black inside as out, even his bones and blood of ebony and ink.

"And now," said the raven, "tell me, if you will, about yourself."

So the white queen—she had no one else to talk to—told the raven how she came to be there, of her wedding, and her husband one hundred and two years old, and of following his cadaver with her white rose, and the torchlit journey here by night, and how it was since the torches went away. It had been so long. Fifty years, or one interminable year, unending.

"As I supposed," said the raven, "your story is sad, sinister, and interesting. Shall I tell you, in turn, what I know of the city?"

The white queen nodded slowly, trembling.

The raven said, "There is still a king in the palace. He has had the walls dyed and the turrets carved with dragons and gryphons and swans. He loves music, dancing, and all beautiful things. He himself is young and handsome. He has been many months looking for a wife. Portraits and descriptions were brought from neighboring kingdoms. None will do. The girls are too plump or too thin, too tall, too short, not serious enough, too serious. He sends back slighting messages and breaks hearts. There have been suicides among the rejects. He himself painted an image of the girl he wants. Slender and pale, with a mouth made to smile and eyes that have held sorrow in them like rain in the cups of two cool flowers. I have seen this portrait," said the raven. "It is yourself."

The queen laughed. She tossed a pinch of incense on the fire to make the room sweet, and so console herself.

"How cruel you are," she said, "when I have tried to be kind."

"Not at all. In seven hours it will be midnight. Do you not guess I am the cousin of midnight? It can therefore sometimes be made to do things for me. And you, as you say, have been kind. I am warmed and fed. May I sleep now by your hearth, fair Blanche?"

The white queen sighed her assent.

Beyond the casement the snow-dusk deepened, and on the hearth the fire turned dense and gave off great heat. The raven seemed to melt into a shadow there. Soon his hostess thought she had dreamed it all, though the empty dishes still stood, dull-



shining in the twilight.

At midnight she woke, perhaps from sleep, and she was no longer in the tower. For a year of years it had contained her, all the world she knew. Now she was free—but how?

She walked over the snow but did not feel the cold through her slim thin shoes. A moon, the condemned white widow-queen of heaven, blazed in the west, and lit the way beyond the walls of the garden, on to the straight road that led to the city. Although the gates were obscured, Blanche passed directly through the mortared stones of the wall. So she knew. "This is only a dream." And bitterly, wistfully, she laughed again. "All things are possible to a dreamer. If this is the raven's gift, let me be glad of it."

Even at these words, she made out a vehicle on the road, which seemed waiting—and for whom but herself? As she stepped closer, she saw it was a beautiful charrette, draped with white satin, and with silver crests on the doors that were like lilies or maybe curved plumes or feathers. White horses in gilded caparison with bells and tassels drew the carriage, but there was no man to drive or escort it.

Nevertheless, the white queen entered and sat down. At once the carriage started off.

Presently, shyly, she glanced at herself. Her mourning garments were gone. The white silk of her gown was figured and fringed by palest rose and sapphire. Her slippers were sewn with pearls. Her hair flowed about her, maiden's hair, heavy, curled and perfumed with musk and oleander. A chaplet of pastel orchids replaced the Alabaster Crown of widowhood and living death.

"And there are moonstones at my throat, silver bands on my fingers. And how the bells ring and sing in the cold night air."

They came into the city, through the gates, unchallenged, through dark slight streets, and broad boulevards where torches flashed and lamps hung like golden fruit from wide windows and bird-cage balconies.

Along this same route Blanche had been driven to her marriage. They had warned her from the beginning the king was old, and not easy, but even that had not put out her pride or pleasure. Until she met him on the mountainous stair and gave up her hand to his of gnarled wood and dry paper. He had glared at her



in terrified lust, fumbling at his throat to breathe. But now she wished to forget and she forgot. Everything was novel, and fresh.

In the courtyard, the charrette stopped still. Blanche left the carriage. She looked and saw the wonderful gryphons and swans and dragons new-made on the turrets where the banners of the king floated out like soft ribbons. Every window was bright, an orchard of windows, peach and cherry and mulberry.

The guards on the stair blinked but did not check or salute her as she went up between them. Some gasped, some gazed, some did not see her. And some crossed themselves.

The doors glanced open without a sound. Or else she thought that they did. She came across several lamplit rooms into a moon-tinctured walk where only glow-worms and fountains flickered, and nightingales made music like the notes of the stars. At the end of the walk, Blanche the white queen saw a golden salon where candleflames burned low. She had known the way.

As she entered, she found the young king of whom the raven had told her. He was dark as she was pale, his own hair black as the branch of a tree against the snow. He was handsome, too. And she felt a pang of love, and another of dismay, though not surprise.

He caught sight of her at once, and started to his feet.

"Are you real?" he said. His voice was musical and tensed between delight and anger.

"No," said Blanche. "I am a dream. Mine, or yours."

"You are a painting come to life."

Blanche smiled. The raven, who surely was to be her tormentor, had spoken the truth to her. Or else, for now, it was the truth.

"I would," he said, "have waited all my life for you. And since you may not be real, I may have to wait, still. Having seen you, I can hardly do otherwise. Unless you consent to stay."

"I think I may be permitted to stay until sunrise. It seems to me I am in league with darkness. Until dawn, then."

"Because you are a ghost."

Blanche went to him across the golden gloom and put her hand in his outstretched hand.

"You are living flesh," said the king. He leaned forward and kissed her lips, quietly. "Warm and douce and live. Even though a dream."

For an hour, they talked together. Musicians were summoned,



and if they saw or feared her, or whatever they thought, they played, and the young queen and the young king danced over the chequered floor. And they drank wine, and walked among roses and sculptures and clocks and mysteries, and so came eventually to a private place, a beautiful bedroom. And here they lay down and were lovers together, splendidly and fiercely and in rapture, and in regret, for it was a dream, however sweet, however true.

"Will you return to me?" he said.

"My heart would wish it. I do not think I shall return, to you."

"I will nevertheless wait for you. In case it chances you put on mortal shape. For this is too lovely to believe in."

"Do not," said Blanche, "wait long. Waiting is a prison." But she knew these words were futile.

Just then a bird sang far away across the palace gardens. It was not a nightingale.

"Let me go now, my beloved," said Blanche. "I must leave instantly. I am partly afraid of what the sun may do to me before your eyes."

"Alas," he said.

He did not hinder her.

Blanche quickly drew on her garments, even the chaplet of orchids which showed no sign of withering. She clasped her jewels about her throat. A frosty sheen lay on the window-panes that the stars and the sinking moon had not put there. "Adieu," she said. "Live well. Do not, do not remember me."

Blanche fled from the chamber and away through the palace, the rooms all darkling now, the silent fountain walk, the outer salons, the stair. In the courtyard the charrette and its horses remained, but it was half transparent. This time, none of the guards had seen her pass. As she hastened on she realized that she had after all forgotten her pearl-sewn slippers. She felt only smooth cobblestones under her feet—there was no snow, and now it came to her that there had been none, in any corner of the city or the palace that she had visited.

The carriage started off. It flew like the wind, or a bell-hung bird, into the face of the dawn. And when the dawn smote through, the carriage fell apart like silver ashes. The sun's lilting blade pierced her heart. And she woke alone, seated in her chair before



the cold hearth, in the pale tower, in the shadowy garden. As she had known she would.

"Cruel raven," said the white queen, as she sprinkled crumbs of meat and bread along the embrasure of her window. She was full of pain and stiffness, and even to do so much made her anxious. Nor did she think he would come back. The winter day had passed, or had it been the whole of the winter which was gone? The snow faded between the shadow trees. The white queen looked from her narrow window and pulled her breath into her body without ease. "Spring will come," she said. "But not any spring for me."

She turned and went back to her chair. Within the white coif, under the Alabaster Crown, her face was like a carved bone, the eyes sunk deep, the cheeks and lips. Her hands were like slender bundles of pale twisted twigs. As she sat, her limbs creaked and crackled, hurting her. Tears welled in the sunken pools of her eyes. They were no longer two flowers holding rain.

"I am old," said the white queen. "In one night, I grew to be so. Or were they fifty nights, or a hundred nights, that seemed only one?" She recalled the young king, and his hair black as a raven. She wept a little, where once she would have laughed at the bitter joke. "He would despise me. No magic now and no demoiselle of dream. I should revolt him now. He would wish me dead, to be free of me." She closed her eyes. "As I wished my own aged husband dead, for I thought even this pale tower could be no worse than marriage to such a creature."

When the white queen opened her eyes, the raven stood in the opened window like a blot of ink.

"Gentle Blanche," said the raven, "Let me come in."

"You are in," she said. "My heart is full of you, you evil magician. I gave you food and drink and shelter and you did harm to me, and perhaps to another. Of course you did."

"Also you, my lady, told me a story. Now I," said the raven, "will tell one to you."

"Long ago," said the raven, "there was a maiden of high birth. Her name was Blanche. She might have made a good marriage among several of the great houses, to young men who were her peers. But it was told to her that she might also make a marriage



with the king and rule the whole kingdom. He was old, decaying and foolish, she was warned of this. But Blanche did not care. Let me agree; he will die soon, thought Blanche. Then I will be regent to any who come after, and still I will rule the land."

"Oh," said the white queen, "I remember."

"However," said the raven, sitting on the hearth like a gargoyle of black coal, "when Blanche was given to the king and saw and touched him, her courage failed her. By then it was too late. They were lighted to their bed and priests blessed it. As he had come from his disrobing, the king had stumbled on Blanche's discarded slippers, and called out, and fallen. As he was revived by his servitors, the aged monarch muttered. He had dreamed of a girl like Blanche eighty years before. Or else it was a spirit who visited him. The girl of his dreams had been his wife for one night, and he had worshipped her ever since, refusing to marry, looking only for his lover to return to him. In his youth he had been mad, ten whole years, following the uncanny visitation, wandering the earth in search of his ghost bride. He had even unearthed tombs and dug up embalmed corpses, to see if any of them might be she. All his life, even when the madness left him, he waited. And it seemed that Blanche, whom he had now wedded, was the image of the ghost-bride and, like her, had left her pearl-sewn slippers lying behind her."

"Yes," said the white queen, "I recall." She leaned her head on her hand, on her sore wrist thin as a stick.

"However," said the raven again, "Blanche barely listened to these ramblings of her senile husband. She lay in the silk covers shrinking and in horror. She thought, he is decrepit and weak and easily distressed, and so easily destroyed. When the servants and the priests were gone, she kneeled up on the bridal couch and taunted her old husband and railed at him. Her tongue was sharp with ambition and loathing. She broke his heart. He died at the foot of the bed."

"I called at once for help," said Blanche. "I thought they would judge me blameless. But it seems someone had stayed to listen and had overheard. For a certain kind of murder, the murder of a king by his queen without the brewing of a draught, the striking of a blow, this is the punishment. Confined alive until death in a tower in a cemetery garden. A white queen, a murderess. I am punished. Why," said the old white queen, "is fate so malicious,



and are you fate? If I had met him as he was that night, young and strong, handsome and wise, how could I not have loved him? Yet I was sent back eighty years to harm him, as I would harm him eighty years in the future. And as he has harmed me."

"You were his punishment," said the raven. "His pride and his own malign tongue had broken hearts, as his would break. He would brook only perfection, a single sort of perfection, and was intolerant of all others. So this perfection came to him and was lost to him. He might have relinquished the dream still, and would not. He waited until he was a hundred and two years of age to claim a girl of twenty, such, even then, was his overbearing blind pride. It cost him dear."

"While I was punished for my wickedness, willing and casting his life away when I might have been happy elsewhere, and he left in peace."

"Each the other's sentence and downfall," said the raven. "As perhaps each knew it must be."

"And you," she said, "are an angel of chastising God. Or the Devil."

"Neither," said the raven. "Should we not chastise ourselves, that we learn?" He flew to the embrasure of the window. Beyond the tower, the trees were dark as always, the tops of the other dreary towers pushed up. But the sky was blushed with blue. Over the wall it would be spring.

"Despite all sins and stupidities," said the raven, "I love you yet and yet have waited for you, gentle, fair Blanche. And you, whether you wished it or no, waited for me in your bone tower, and at the last as at the first, you were kind."

The white queen wept. Her tears were like pearls.

"Let us," said the raven, "be together a little while, in freedom and innocence."

"Oh, how can you speak?" she cried.

"Oh, how can you understand what I say?"

Then the white queen left her chair. She left her body and bones and old pale blood, for she was white now inside and out. She flew up into the window embrasure. From the prison towers only the souls of dreamers or the wings of birds could get out. Up like arrows flew two ravens, one black as pitch, one white as snow, and away together over the trees, the wall, the road, the city, the world, into the sky of spring. ●

THE SPACE SONG OF J. A. PRUFROCK III

Let us go then, you and me,
Where the monster is laid out beside the sea
Like a sonnet osterized upon a carpet;
Let us go in rusty dirt-encrusted ships,
The dedicated crypts
Of fruitless flights to distant wrinkled moons
And early trips in stern hot-air balloons.

On the deck the captain casts us off
Quoting from Isaac Asimov.

And indeed there will be time
To watch the comets slide across the sky
Rubbing their backs upon the porthole panes.
There will be time
To search the ship in all its secret places,
To probe the color of each passing star,
To speculate on all the foreign faces
And sample every drink in every bar.
There will be time to study Earth's survival
Between the time of leaving and arrival.

The captain tunes his violin
And quotes from Ursula K. Le Guin.

But I have read them all already, read them all—
Have read Delany, McIntyre, and Disch,
Wollstonecraft and Campbell, Verne and Blish,
Have read a thousand stories, stories short and tall,
Under the multiple moons of many a purple sky.

So how can I deny?

And I have used the words already, used them all—
The words that freeze together in a frozen phrase,
That stagger off the margin, off the page,
And all the voices dying with a dying fall.
Then how can I assuage
The scratching on my back, my wooden ways?
And how can I deny?

I grow cold . . . I grow cold . . .
I shall order mustard plasters from the hold.

Should I play a game of hearts? Join the next potato race?
Or take a black umbrella and walk about in space?
I have seen chimeras weeping, face to face.
I do not think that they will weep for me.



—Hope
Athearn



THE ARTIST OF HUNGER

by Scott Sanders

art: Gary Freeman

The author says that he intends to keep exploring the long, troubled frontier between the human world and nature.

He recently finished two books which explore that frontier—*Wilderness Plots* and *Terrarium*. He further says that unlike the artist

In this story, he is thin rather than fat, and consumed by hungers, but not for food.



It was not a very convincing dawn. Near the eastern horizon the sky was the color of chicken liver simmering in butter. Flocks of birds melted against the sunrise in chocolate tones. Banks of clouds surged down from the north like a tide of mashed potatoes, and dainty popcorn clouds lingered in the south.

Edible, yes, but one could hardly call it convincing. Gripping a lightbrush in one hand and a mug of malto in the other, Sir Toby Moore reclined upon a couch and brooded on his wretched painting. The image shimmered above him on the vaulted ceiling of his studio, a miniature of the image that would later be projected onto the domes of malls in five continents. With the lightbrush he added another touch of butter yellow to the sunrise. Rather a vulgar mixture of foods, he had to confess, what with chicken giblets and chocolates. Why could he paint nothing but banquet skies? They had become a fixation with him, these firmaments stuffed with meats and candies, poultries and pastries. He took a chilly swig of malto, then lay back on the couch and set the mug upon his prominent belly.

Sir Toby's belly was prominent in two respects: it was huge and it was famous. Its conspicuous bulk was due to his zeal for eating, his distaste for exercise, and his steadfast refusal to undergo a slenderizing operation. His rotund silhouette had become famous, belonging as it did to one of the most celebrated mall artists in North America, an artist, moreover, whose sponsor, MEGA Corporation, owned The Sleek of Araby, the leading chain of slenderizing shops. He was not what anyone would regard as a walking exhibit of the virtues of slimness. Nonetheless, he liked to think of himself as being only physically fat, and not metaphysically so. In his heart and brain he was no fatter than the next person. Indeed, for the first twenty-odd years of his life he had not even been especially fat in body. Plump, maybe. Only since moving into the Rogue River Mall six years earlier had he begun to put on weight, and to keep putting on weight, season after season, like an iceberg accumulating each winter's snow.

Journalists christened him Sir Tubby, Sir Roly-Poly. Camera crews delighted in filming him while he escorted his petite lady-friend, Lyla Bellard, from restaurant or cinema. On video he would loom beside her, huge and pale, like a leashed polar bear.

One such video exposure aired while Sir Toby was engaged in perusing his chicken-liver sunrise. He was quickly informed of this new publicity by a MEGA vice-president, whose bony face materialized on the phonescreen. "You just can't stay away from the cameras, can you?" said the woman in an exasperated voice.

"Can I help it if the photographers hide in the plastic shrubbery and ambush me every time I stir from my apartment?" replied Sir Toby.

"Not only do we see you from all angles, with your tiny mistress standing next to you as if to represent the human scale, but afterwards they show a panel of three doctors who're trying to guess your weight and your life expectancy." The vice-president forced a smile, like a doctor trying to cheer up a terminal patient. The taut skin of her cheeks reminded Sir Toby of trampolines. "We've already had several hundred complaints from stockholders."

"They want my head on a platter," he suggested.

"They'd rather have your belly, and maybe half of each haunch. Enough to slim you down to respectable proportions."

Knowing, or at least hoping, that he was too valuable a property for MEGA to lose, he said boldly: "So fire me. I'll take my stool into the mall and go back to doing laser portraits."

"Don't play the grand man. It doesn't suit you."

"So I was on video. All right. Shoot the cameraman. What else do you want?"

"I want to appeal to your dignity."

Sir Toby half-lifted the mug from his belly, and then, bethinking himself, lowered it again. He was famished. The woman on the phonescreen kept smiling grimly. All these corporate image people had too many teeth. "My dignity?"

"When people think of The Sleek of Araby, Sir Toby, we want them to *think thin*. We want them to imagine twigs, not stumps."

"I assure you," he bluffed, "being a stump is far more weighty and consequential than being a twig. Do you, for instance, truly enjoy being scrawny as a stick? What do your male friends hold on to?"

The vice-president's grin froze, an expanse of teeth floating on the screen like a half-moon. "Listen, our competitors have mounted posters of you in their shops, identifying you as The Sleek of Araby mascot. As our *symbol*."

Sir Toby groaned. He was only too familiar with those competitors and their revolting names: Fat-Away Farms, Rub-a-Dub-Tubby's, The Beauty and the Feast, The Incredible Shrinking Man, Ipso Fatso, Gorge Us George's, each of them with outlets in malls across the country, vying with one another in the electronic war against obesity. The mere thought of these shops, their glistening needles and microwave vaporizers, made Sir Toby queasy. On several occasions he had gone so far as to deposit

himself on the slenderizing couch in a Sleek of Araby parlor, only to flee in terror once he caught sight of the fat-extraction devices. The whole enterprise struck him as an unholy alliance between modern electronics and medieval torture.

"I can't help the way your competitors decorate their shops," he said.

"But you can. A series of operations . . ."

"Out of the question."

"MEGA would raise your fee . . ."

He lurched upright on the couch and glared into the phone-screen. "Madam, I'm an artist, not a rack for displaying clothes. Nor a video star. It so happens I am content with my present shape. I have no desire to resemble a weasel or a lightning rod. If MEGA doesn't approve of my physique, then I'll get someone else to broadcast my skies."

The professional smile faltered. "I only meant to suggest a possibility."

"An impossibility."

"You won't even consider it?"

"I have considered, and the answer is no. I won't have my body milked and shriveled by any imbecile machinery."

"Could you at least arrange for a larger mistress. Miss Bellard makes you appear so—"

Sir Toby flung the empty mug at the screen. Plastic bounced harmlessly against plastic, freezing the vice-president in mid-sentence. With the angry punch of a button he erased her image. Those extravagant teeth were the last of her to wink into oblivion.

He longed to gather all these corporate image makers, tie them in a sack, and dump them in the Rogue River—assuming one could still *find* the river, down in its concrete channel far beneath the mall. They would never quit meddling with a person. When they insisted on changing his name from Thurgood Moranski to Toby Moore, he had been annoyed, but he could see their point. Placing the "Sir" in front of it (when neither he nor any of his ancestors had ever so much as visited England, let alone been knighted by the king) had seemed to him more comical than sinister. But next they ordered him to shave his beard, give up wearing plaid dinner jackets, take up wearing square-toed shoes, and then he began to grow irritable. (He now wore plaid coats and even plaid trousers at every opportunity, to spite them, and his blond beard reached halfway down his chest.) Once they offered to hire a svelte actor, some moronic whippet, to make all

his public appearances, but Sir Toby had threatened to strangle the man on sight.

And now this really was too much, when they began dictating the size of his mistress. He adored Lyla, every cubic centimeter of her. The less of her there was, the more affection he could invest per gram. She was the only woman who had ever succeeded in making him feel graceful. "It's not a matter of bulk," she told him early in their friendship. "It's how the soul moves." The way she said it made him feel that his soul was as tangible as his fleecy beard. When their friendship had matured sufficiently to afford him an opportunity of examining her naked body, he had searched her belly for the telltale puncture scars from slenderizing operations. He had seen the scars on so many others, on men in saunas and shower rooms, on women in swimming pools and in less public places, those tiny puckerings of skin like pursed lips marking where the needles had done their work. But the skin on Lyla's belly was as smooth and unblemished as a freshly laundered sheet. "However do you manage to stay thin without subjecting yourself to those barbarous operations?" he asked her. "I only eat when I'm hungry," she told him. "So do I," he said. To which she replied, "Ah, yes, but you're hungry all the time."

That was unfortunately true. Hunger gnawed at him relentlessly, like a rat trying to escape from his stomach. Even while recollecting that first delightful survey of Lyla's belly, he was munching pretzels and sipping yet another mug of malto. He could only stop thinking about food when he was sleeping or, strangely enough, when he was at Lyla's apartment. She utterly refused to live in the mall, or even to visit him there, complaining that its hives of bedrooms and clanging shops made her ill. She lived instead in one of the military research installations, out in the Cascade Mountains. "Why don't you come live with me?" she had urged him on many occasions. But he had always refused. Since childhood, he had dreamed of growing rich enough to live forevermore inside a mall. Each mall was like ancient Rome, the empire's center, into which all the tributary streams of civilization constantly poured. That childhood vision still held so firm a grip on his imagination that nothing less than the powerful lure of Lyla could ever persuade him to venture outside.

Between thoughts of Lyla and the infuriating telephone call, Sir Toby was too stirred up to resume painting. So he left the image of his half-finished sky shimmering on the roof of his studio and trudged out into the mall. Some piece of trash was playing

overhead on the domescreen: it looked rather like the effects of a hurricane on a mattress factory, interspersed with fireworks. Gaudy junk. He withdrew his gaze just as the ad bloomed across the screen: a close-up of a woman sucking on a straw. Slurp, slurp. Luscious lips. That would be Cravin' Haven. "Food for the Famished." He knew all the icons by heart.

Dodging a pack of kids, who were bearing down on him in a zipcart, Sir Toby clutched a plastic tree for support and nearly uprooted it. That was one of the humiliations of being fat in a world of skinny people: you had to lean on things, on chair-backs and railings, and could never feel confident they would bear your weight. An alarm rang and a guard immediately appeared. "Who's messing with the vegetation?" Sir Toby retreated, explaining the accident, but not before the guard had recognized him. Lifted eyebrows. "Hey, you that painter?"

"No, no, somebody else entirely," Sir Toby insisted, stepping onto a pedbelt, which soon delivered him from the inquiring guard.

Music blaring overhead announced a change of program, and he made the mistake of looking up. An ad for Sleek of Araby burst on the screen: twin portraits of a young man, in the first of which he appeared grotesquely swollen, his eyes mere slits, his jowls bulging over his collar, while in the second portrait, taken after the slenderizing operation, he looked as lithe as an undersea creature. An electric eel, say, or a muskrat, thought Sir Toby sourly. "LET THE SLEEK OF ARABY MAKE YOU LOOK LIKE YOUR REAL SELF AGAIN," the announcer boomed. The artists had taken great pains to make the withered young man appear handsome and fetching, but in Sir Toby's eyes he looked sadly shrunken, like a helium balloon, abandoned at night in plump grandeur near the ceiling, discovered next morning in a shriveled heap of rubber on the floor.

As he rode the crowded belts through the avenues of the mall, he noticed the other riders drawing away from him, their scrawny bodies encircling him like a stockade fence about a blockhouse. He was painfully accustomed to this isolation. The halo of space they left around him bore less resemblance to the aura of respect surrounding a king than to a *cordon sanitaire*. Their distance kept him in quarantine, as if they feared an epidemic of obesity would spread outward from him to infect the planet.

Most of his fellow belt riders were nibbling snacks and guzzling drinks from cans. The noise of munching and swallowing was louder than the soundtrack that accompanied the domeshow. As

the belt slithered past foodshops, the empty-handed riders stepped off to replenish their supplies, and new riders hopped aboard with jaws grinding. Sir Toby was feeling momentarily virtuous amid all this eating until he realized that he was actually holding a nearly empty bag of salties in his hand. He stopped in mid-chew. Where had they come from? Probably his pocket. Food seemed always to hide in his coats and trousers, even though he could rarely remember putting it there. Maybe he was being followed by a malicious pickpocket who, instead of removing his wallet, stuffed Sir Toby's pockets with grub. After hesitating briefly, he shook the remaining salties into his mouth, then jammed the crumpled sack into the handkerchief pocket of his plaid sportcoat. Inside, his fingertips discovered several lumps of hard candy, stored there like a squirrel's acorns. With an effort of will he forced himself to leave the candies in place.

When his hand came out of the pocket empty, he was overwhelmed by such an intense craving for sugar that he lost his balance and staggered a few steps along the pedbelt. The other riders cleared away from him, keeping out of range in case he should fall. He felt panicky with hunger. The sound of chomping reverberated in his ears. He had to get off, get away from all these stares, go somewhere to eat in secret. As he lurched to the rim of the belt, the people making way for him muttered, "It's about time!" "They'll have their work cut out for them!" "It's a desperate case!" Glancing up, he saw the lurid neon lights of a Rub-a-Dub-Tubby's looming into view. Beyond that shone the lights of Fat-Away Farms and Gorge Us George's. Sir Toby teetered on the edge of the pedbelt, unwilling to let the skinny riders think he was going into one of those shops for an operation. But someone shoved him in the back with a blunt object (perhaps a sausage or a loaf of rye bread, he imagined in his hunger), and he stumbled onto the pavement, nearly bumping into an emaciated woman who was just emerging from the door of Fat-Away Farms.

"Sir Roly-Poly!" the woman exclaimed.

"Moore," he answered stiffly.

She grinned up at him with her newly shrunken face. A series of fresh scars along her throat and jaw stood out like scarlet stitches. "Just like in your picture," she breathed.

"Picture?"

"That poster they've got hanging inside there," she said, as she brushed past him to hop on the belt.

And it was true. There on the rear wall of the slenderizing parlor hung a life-size portrait of him, in corpulent profile and

living color. He stood in the doorway, mesmerized by his unflattering likeness. It dominated the shop, like some evil icon for frightening passersby into the clutches of the fat-removal machines. The caption below read: PRODUCED BY THE SLEEK OF ARABY. One of the operators glanced at him, then at the poster, then back again at Sir Toby, eyes widening, needle poised above the beefy thigh of a carefully draped customer.

"You're all a pack of leeches and ghouls!" bellowed Sir Toby through the open door. "Fat suckers and walking cadavers!" A dozen operators glared at him now and a dozen customers stirred beneath their draperies. Then as an after thought, backing away, he shouted, "May every needle hit a nerve!"

Fuming, he avoided the pedbelt, with its cargo of chomping scarecrows, and ambled down the walkway past Gorge Us George's and Ipso Fatso's. He stole a glance through the window of each shop, and in each he saw his grotesque portrait.

He walked hurriedly on, feeling morose and hungry. Within moments he was puffing. At least, in his unhappiness, he was burning calories. Lyla would be proud of him, out exercising vigorously like this. She despised pedbelts and elevators, insisted on using her own legs to go everywhere. Such legs! Not thin, really. In fact, nicely rounded. They were merely small and delightfully proportioned, like all the rest of her, as if she had been designed to fit a daintier world than the one other mortals inhabited.

Outside the window of a Cravin' Haven his exercise came to a halt, and he stared in like a tramp at the diners seated along the counter. His mouth opened and shut in voracious sympathy with theirs. At about the third bite he tasted chocolate, having unconsciously stuffed his mouth with joybars, which he had fished from some forgotten hiding place in his voluminous suit. The taste of chocolate always dissolved his last vestiges of self-restraint. Transfixed before the window of the snackshop, he pulled from his pockets and devoured in rapid succession the hard candies (butterscotch), a box of raisins, a rather stale pastry, and a packet of crushed soy-chips. After the last hiding place had been ransacked he went on thrusting hands into pockets, opening and closing his coat, slapping his thigh and rump, in search of more food. He only gave up searching when he noticed that the diners inside Cravin' Haven were watching his pantomime with great amusement, pointing at him with drinking straws and half-eaten burgers. Several of them appeared to be mouthing his name, or some slanderous variation on his name.

Again he walked on through the mall, sunk in gloom, wonder-

ing how far he would have to trudge in order to burn up all the calories he had just consumed. It was hopeless. His exercise would never catch up with his eating. He could sympathize with people who every day sank more deeply into debt. Still he was ravenous. It was absurd, it was humiliating, to be so thoroughly a creature of one's belly. "Where on earth does this appetite come from?" he had asked Lyla, and then, mockingly, he had suggested, "From my artistic temperament?"

"It comes from staying in the mall—that constant bombardment—" she said, "and from not living with me."

Bombardment. Perhaps she had something there, he conceded, as he shuffled past eateries, eros parlors, feelie shops, costume boutiques, arcades. And there were the perpetual domeshows and ads blaring down.

What was playing right now, for example? Peering up, he was startled to see a rerun of one of his own vintage sky-paintings. Cumulus clouds that actually looked like clouds instead of mashed potatoes; Chinese dragon kites playing against a lavender haze; a flight of Canada geese beating their way across the face of a woozy late-afternoon sun; around the horizon a rim of hills topped by the spire-points of conifers. He had painted that sky at least a dozen years earlier, when still a teenager, long before moving into the mall. It already showed his characteristic strokes with the lightbrush. Yet, by comparison with his recent work, overstuffed with allusions to food, this early painting seemed to him fresh and powerful. Every detail in it was authentic, something he had *seen* rather than vaguely hungered for. It was a creation of the eye, not the belly.

Had he lost so much power? he wondered, standing there outside a Never Say Diet store ("Open for Eating 25 Hours a Day"), weeping, a bloated silhouette so familiar that shoppers paused to gape at him. The tears slithered through his beard and rolled down the hidden folds of his chin.

For such profound misery there was only one antidote—Lyla. He barged straight for her, like a draft horse headed for the barn, riding the shuttle through its translucent tube out to the research installation in the Cascade Mountains. She would scold him for bothering her at work, something he had never done before. But he didn't care. This was an emergency. Most likely she would be dousing rats with exotic rays, turning them into lizards or spoons, and how important was that by comparison with the salvation of her lover?

He did not even begin to understand Lyla's research, and was not certain he wanted to. It involved poking about in the brain with vibrations, or perhaps devising ways of preventing *others* from poking about in the brain, or some such business. All very mathematical—which meant, so far as he was concerned, that it might just as well have been carried on in the language of dolphins. Never having progressed much beyond the multiplication table, Sir Toby resolutely avoided any commerce with numbers or equations. He was grateful that he did not need to understand electronics in order to use a lightbrush, or to understand holographics in order to have his skies broadcast in malls.

The shuttle quivered to a halt. He glanced at the signboard: two more stops to go. Ads glowed on walls and ceilings. Announcers kept up a sales patter: buy me, buy me. During the lull in the station, the sounds of chewing wafted like subdued applause from seats all around him. Then he remembered with a feeling akin to despair that he had emptied his pockets in the mall. There were vending machines two cars down, but he could not bring himself to squeeze his way along the aisle past all those staring faces. Lyla would very likely have nothing to eat in her lab. She seemed to subsist entirely on air and moisture, like the mint-green plant he kept hanging in his bathroom.

He would just have to endure the hunger. Only two more stops. Surely there would be a snackbar at the research center. Or perhaps he could persuade a guard to sell the contents of his lunchbucket.

At thought of the guard, a worry suddenly arose in his mind. What if they refused to let him in? Didn't one have to be investigated back seven generations in order to work in these military places? And nobody trusted an artist. Who could tell, he might snoop around, memorize a few things, and paint some wiring diagrams into his next sky. Broadcast military secrets in malls around the world. Spies would stop in the middle of their shopping, gaze up at his revelations, snap quick photos to smuggle back to enemy governments.

No, they would never let him in.

Another quiver of the shuttle. His stop. He might as well try. Charge the gate with head lowered. All they could do was shoot him. Perhaps Lyla could vouch for him, fit him with a blindfold and lead him by the hand to her ratmaze lab. He stood up, smacked his jacket and trousers into some semblance of neatness, and shuffled onto the platform. No one else left the shuttle (all of them doubtless intending, like sensible people, to cross the mountains

into eastern Oregon or Idaho), and no one stood on the platform waiting. There were no vending machines, no benches or ticket booths. In fact, so far as he could see, the station consisted of a single windowless room, white enamel over metal, with a formidable-looking door at one end and warning signs plastered on all the walls.

Before he could read the warnings, a video camera swiveled down to focus on him from a perch above the door, and a voice boomed from some hidden speaker: "STATE YOUR BUSINESS! CLEARANCE CODE! KEYWORD!"

Sir Toby blinked at the camera. "I merely wanted to visit a friend."

Evidently this answer stunned the guard, for several seconds of electronic hum ensued. Presently the same male voice, but considerably humbled now, inquired: "Excuse me, sir, but you wouldn't be the guy who paints the skies, would you? Sir Toby Something?"

"Moore," Sir Toby answered, bowing slightly. "I've come to see Dr. Bellard on urgent business. May I speak with her please? I promise not to kidnap her or to steal away any portion of your laboratory."

A moment later the combined breathing of several onlookers, who had evidently gathered at the microphone, was audible through the speakers. "Look," whispered a female voice. "It's him all right." There was a muffled discussion, of which he could only decipher two words, Toby and Lyla. This conference was terminated by a harsh laugh, and then the first guard's chastened voice: "One moment, Sir, while I page Dr. Bellard."

Sir Toby, who was beginning to feel rather like a zoo exhibit here in his steel cage, turned away from the camera to wait. Out of habit, he searched all his pockets once again, plaid coat and trousers, vest and shirt. Much to his surprise, he actually discovered a chocolate joybar in one of his watchpockets. To his even greater surprise, he felt no desire to eat it. Indeed, he felt crammed to the gullet, as if he could easily go a month before his next meal. With a shiver of revulsion, he slipped the joybar back into its hiding place. What was happening to him? He studied the bare white walls of his cubicle suspiciously. Maybe they were beaming rays at him to quench his hunger. They did such things at these psy-labs, he was sure of that. Poking about in the brain.

He felt suddenly faint. There being no seat, he backed into a corner of the cell and propped himself against the two walls. Lyla would make them stop experimenting on him. Would she appear

on a screen, or through the door? Then again, she might not even be here today, might be off testing a new weapon at the desert firing range.

So intent was he on calculating these various possibilities that he did not hear the door open or the footsteps lightly approach.

"Toby, darling," came a gentle voice, "whatever's the matter?"

It was as if someone had set off a recording of birdsong in his heart. He staggered out of the corner like a punch-drunk boxer and engulfed her in an enormous hug, murmuring, "Lyla, Lyla, they're tormenting me."

"Who?" she cried indignantly, drawing back far enough to gaze at him with fierce brown eyes.

"Everybody. The journalists with their infernal cameras. The Sleek of Araby bosses with their teeth and their needles. People who gawk at me in the mall. And even here," he protested, gesturing at the camera's glass eye, "the guards are beaming some kind of—" he groped for a word, "*fullness* rays at me."

"Fullness rays?" she repeated skeptically.

He explained to her about the uneaten chocolate bar, the full stomach, the faintness.

"Don't be silly." Her small hand played like a mouse in his beard. "Do you think I'd step in here if they were irradiating this cubicle? It's okay. Really." As if to reassure him about the wholesomeness of the cell, she lifted her arms and turned once around, lithe and caressable in a rust-colored jumpsuit, the laboratory insignia attached on one shoulder and her rank stitched on a breast pocket. It was always disconcerting for him to be reminded that this tiny woman, with her ponytail and mice-size hands, actually worked for the psy-war division of the Pentagon.

"I just feel awfully strange," he said.

"Why don't you take a vacation from the mall?" she suggested, as she had so often suggested before. "Stay out here at my place?"

"The evening news would love that."

"So what more can they say about us than they've said already?"

He wavered. "Yes, but I've got a sky-mural due in two days."

"I'll fetch a lightbrush and projector from the lab."

"But I've already got part of a sky shining on my ceiling."

"We'll have the tapes buzzed out here. Easy." She looked at him intently, a slight smile on her face. "Have you run out of excuses?"

He shrugged, and returned her smile. He had always offered the same excuses. Publicity. Work. Deadlines. Yet, in his heart of hearts—or perhaps his stomach of stomachs—he had been re-

luctant to leave the mall itself, with its eateries and domeshows and pleasure arcades. Now the mere thought of food filled him with loathing. And as for pleasure, there was always Lyla.

"The change might do me some good," he agreed at last.

"Delightful!" She took one of his great paws in her tiny one, and with her other hand she waved at the camera. The featureless door clicked open. Someone had been watching, of course.

The partially finished sky glimmered on the ceiling of Lyla's apartment: chicken-liver sunrise, chocolate birds, mashed-potato clouds. But after three hours of frowning at this confection, Sir Toby still could not bring himself to add one stroke of the light-brush. Lyla had scoffingly called it "the great flying smorgasbord," and he was inclined to agree with her. Only a starving man had any business painting such toothsome skies, and Sir Toby, lounging like a walrus upon Lyla's couch, could no longer pretend to be starving. He still had cravings aplenty, but not for food. With the flick of a switch he erased it all, the popcorn and giblets, the gravies and syrups, the sugary constellations. He closed his eyes and waited for some new image to creep into his inward vision.

He was still contemplating the dark interstellar spaces when Lyla called to him from the guest bedroom. Ordinarily he avoided this room, for it housed a colony of white rats, quick little beasts which, having served their purpose in the laboratory, had been saved by Lyla from extermination. "I have something to show you," she said.

With a sigh, he shuffled down the hallway, but only after tucking his pant legs into his socks as a precaution against the inquisitive rats.

Lyla stood just outside a low plexiglass gate which sealed the doorway. "Closer," she insisted, drawing him up to the threshold by his elbow. The room was bare except for a few dishes of food, some rodent-scale exercise equipment, a pair of plastic mazes, and the population of rats, which were skittering nervously about like dancers practicing their steps before curtain rise. "Now watch," said Lyla, pushing a button in the wall.

The ceiling was quickly suffused with a rose-colored glow, gradually darkening to the color of tomato soup. Within that goop, creamy pasta shapes began to congeal. Sir Toby immediately recognized this as the overture to one of his recent skies, broadcast within the past six months. "How did you get hold of it?" he asked.

"Military channels," she answered darkly. "Just watch what happens."

He knew only too well what would happen. After the tomato soup would come lasagne, eggplant parmigiana, and so on through a five-course Italian meal, all smeared across the ceiling in shades of catsup. He could not bear to watch. In any case, he was distracted by a scrabbling noise. When he looked down, afraid the beasts might be assaulting his stockinged feet, he saw the rats galloping pell-mell toward the food dishes, fighting for position at the trough, gorging themselves. Bits of grain flew in all directions as the white jaws snapped. Watching them made his skin crawl. The rats nipped at one another in their frenzy to get at the food. They hauled themselves from dish to dish, sometimes with engorged bellies actually dragging on the floor.

"They'll kill themselves," he said with horror.

"Some of them would, if I left it running long enough."

"My sky is doing that?" Standing in the doorway, he realized that a feeling of hunger was mixing with his nausea.

"Not your sky, but what your sponsor blended in with it." Lyla tucked her hand under one of his arms. "Stick your head inside the room and see how it feels."

Fascinated, frightened, he leaned over the threshold, and was immediately seized by an overwhelming craving. He clutched at his stomach, screaming, "Turn it off!"

Lyla quickly extinguished the painting, drew him back into the hallway, put her arms around as much of him as she could encompass. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, but you wouldn't have believed me if I'd just told you about it."

"What—?" he began, but he was too dazed even to formulate a question. He sympathized with the rats, which now lay on their sides, paws outstretched, swollen bellies laboriously heaving.

"They spliced into your sky-tape an overlay that directly stimulates the hunger center in the brain," Lyla explained. "You get a more concentrated charge in here than you get in a mall, but this gives you an idea of the effect."

"They can *do* that?"

"Yes, they most certainly can, and they *have* been doing it for six or seven years."

"Keeping everybody hungry?"

She nodded. "Twenty-four hours a day. In every mall and shuttle, in the stadiums and domes."

"But not here?" he said, thinking of the military quarters, the

labs and warehouses that spread around them in a labyrinth of windowless buildings.

"No, our heads have to be kept clear." With heavy irony, she added, "National security."

He gazed in at the bloated rats. A few weeks of such eating, and they would all need slenderizing operations. From trough to needle. Then back to trough? With a sudden bitter rush of insight, he understood: foodshops and slenderizing parlors, Cravin' Havens and Sleek of Araby's, they were the opposite poles of the same mad orbit, hounded into eating and then shamed into shrinking, driven by the impulses that showered down from the domes.

In a voice filled with dismay he asked, "Do you know how it works?"

"I helped develop the process," said Lyla.

"You! For the malls?"

"No, of course not. For the military. It was only supposed to be used in war. But the generals weren't interested in stimulating hunger, so the Pentagon licensed these civilian applications."

"What were the generals looking for?"

"The sorts of things that would immobilize an enemy."

"Like what?"

"Like sleep or panic. Like blind anger or lust. With slight variations in impulse you can trigger any of the basic responses."

He glowered at her. "It's *evil*."

"It's necessary. Or so they keep telling me. The world's dangerous."

"Even the hunger? Is that necessary? The feed-troughs and needles?"

"I didn't want that," Lyla replied hotly. "I had no part in this stupid business of the malls."

"But it's going on out there right now," he bellowed, pointing in the vague direction of the nearest mall, "your hunger-storm, your poisonous rain!"

"It's not mine!"

"You let it happen!" He charged angrily down the hall, away from her, away from the swollen rats.

"Thurgood," she called after him in a restrained voice, using his real name, the name she sometimes whispered when they were making love. He paused in the hallway, his back to her. And she said: "I didn't have to show you my little demonstration with the rats, did I? I'd never told you the truth before because I was afraid you'd condemn me. I kept trying to get you to move out of

the mall, because I wanted to save you from that constant bombardment. That hunger-storm, as you call it. But you wouldn't come."

He resumed his angry march into the living room, where he began putting on his shoes.

"Maybe I should have kept lying to you," she cried. "Left you in your sweet ignorance."

In the middle of the living room, he swung round, a shoe dangling from one finger. "How can you go to that lab every day, knowing how people live in the malls?"

She closed on him rapidly, with the blind fury of a miniature dog attacking a rhinoceros. Both fists raised, she pounded him on the chest, tipping him backwards onto the couch. "Hasn't your work been used for things you don't believe in?" Lyla shouted. "Haven't they bought your creations and used them to manipulate people? Haven't they?"

"I had no way of knowing," he protested.

She leaned over him, tiny and fierce, arms akimbo and fists on hips. "You knew enough. Maybe not about the hunger-probes, but you knew MEGA owns both ends of the food-and-fat circuit, all those slenderizing parlors and glutton shops with their stupid names. You saw the ads. You hummed the tunes in your sleep. You knew your paintings were luring people onto the tables, shoving them under the needles."

"I never—" he began. Then he faltered into silence, for she was right, he had let his work be used to sell whatever MEGA wanted to sell. Food. Needles. They had provided him with an empty canvas, huge blank domes in a thousand shopping malls, and because they had let him spread his visions there, he had closed his eyes to the ads. Now he felt profoundly ashamed. For the second time that day, he had been forced to look at his own unflattering portrait, and for the second time he cried.

"Thurgood?" said Lyla. "Sweetheart?"

He felt the weight of her on his lap, her legs straddling him and her knees resting on the couch. With both hands she stroked his forehead, as if smoothing a handkerchief.

"I know what you feel," she murmured. "I've lived with it a long time."

For supper there was yoghurt and salad. Lyla knew how to find such arcane foods, perhaps through "military channels." Though it was delicious, Sir Toby could not bring himself to finish his meal. Every bite made him think of those rats, of the munching

passengers aboard the shuttle, of the chewing faces at the counter in Cravin' Haven. As he picked at his plate, Lyla said, "Keep this up, and you'll melt away to nothing."

He laughed, relieved that they still loved one another. "Sure, like an iceberg, in about ten years of hot weather."

The image of the iceberg reminded him of that vice-president from MEGA, her professional teeth floating on the screen, and he was immediately sunk into gloom once again. He couldn't go on doing Sleek of Araby skies. But what could he paint? Where could he get his murals shown?

Sensing this change in mood, Lyla said, "Never mind, we'll find other work. There must be some things we can do with our hands and brains that don't involve turning people into puppets."

"Let's hope so." He rose to clear the table and load the dishes into the washer. He was handling the last plate, blank of mind, when he noticed a hairline crack in the glaze. Immediately he set the plate down, rushed into the living room, grabbed the light-brush, and began sketching feathery shapes on the ceiling. The crack had jarred loose some image in him, and the pattern was rapidly materializing in the white space overhead, branched and feathery, a delicate tracery of lines.

Lyla soon nestled against him, gazing up at the emerging design. "It's lovely," she said.

He worked along furiously for a spell, until he felt the shape was there, the essential body of the thing, all cross-hatches and webs, delicate interlacing wisps. "I can't remember what it is," he said, "but that's what it looks like."

Lyla stared for a few moments. Then she said, "It's frost. Frost on a window."

Yes, of course. He was elated. Where had the memory lingered in him? Perhaps he had seen it at his grandparents' home, out in the Oregon woods, frost on the window of a winter morning.

So there were paintings in him still, even ones as delicate and unforeseen as this tracery on the ceiling. Paintings! Suddenly he had an idea, an idea so outrageous that he began hopping around the apartment in delight. "O, Lyla! O, Lyla!"

"What is it?" She spun about in consternation as he circled her in his lumbering dance.

"I want to broadcast one last sky!" he whooped. "That one right there," pointing at the ceiling. "Frost! And I want you to have it doctored up for me, have those impulse things stuck in. Not hunger this time. No, no. This time it's going to be sex. The Sleek of Araby brings you an orgy! Think of it. The dome lights up, my

frost creeps over the screen, and soon everyone in malls on seven continents is grabbing the nearest warm body, ripping away clothes, tumbling onto the carpeted floors! Shopkeepers flop down in the aisles. Customers wrestle one another onto counters. The guards unbutton their uniforms. Every mall in the network turns into a pleasure pit, a heap of writhing lovers. What do you say? That would put MEGA and the rest of them out of the impulse business, wouldn't it?"

As he danced in circles around her, his arms waving and beard wagging, Lyla gaped at him from the center of the living room, like a bear-handler whose pet had suddenly gone berserk. "That's utterly crazy," she breathed.

"Sure it is, sure it is. But you'll do it for me, won't you, sweet-ums?"

"I couldn't do anything like *that*," she murmured, but she said it without conviction.

"Hah!" He beamed at her. Wrapping his great arms about her, he lifted her from the floor and shook her playfully, a bear with a ragdoll. For a moment her smile was uncertain, and then it brightened into glee. ●



MARTIN GARDNER

(from page 25)

SOLUTIONS TO THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST

1. Only MONDAY has a sum of 666 ($112 + 114 + 113 + 103 + 100 + 124 = 666$). This was discovered by one of Steuben's former students. Another former student discovered that PAYDAY also is a 666 word in the same code, which is not surprising considering that payday often comes on Monday.

2. To prove that the Beast is a fox, number the alphabet as shown below, and note the three letters that fall under 6:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	



THE ASCENT OF THE NORTH FACE

by Ursula K. Le Guin

art: John Pierard

If we were to attempt to list all of the author's works, prizes, and places of publication here, this introduction would probably be longer than the charming, atypical little piece which follows.

However, for those few of you who do not devour her latest book as it appears, her most recent is *Compass Rose* (1982, Harper & Row).

- 2/21. Robert has reached Base Camp, with five Sherbets. He brought several copies of the *Times* from last month, which we devoured eagerly. Our team is now complete. Tomorrow the Advance Party goes up. Weather holds.
- 2/22. Accompanied Advance Party as far as the col below The Verandah before turning back. Winds up to 40 mph in gusts, but weather holds. Tonight Peter radioed all well at Verandah Camp. The Sherbets are singing at their campfire.
- 2/23. Making ready. Tightened gossels. Weather holds.
- 2/24. Reached Verandah Camp easily in one day's climb. Tricky bit where the lattice and tongue-in-groove join, but Advance Party had left rope in place and we negotiated the overhang without real difficulty. Omu Ba used running jump and arrived earlier than rest of party. Inventive but undisciplined. Bad example to other Sherbets. Verandah Camp is level, dry, sheltered, far more comfortable than Base. Glad to be out of the endless rhododendrons. Snowing tonight.
- 2/25. Immobilised by snow.
- 2/26. Same.
- 2/27. Same. Finished last sheets of *Times* (adverts).
- 2/28. Derek, Nigel, Colin, and I went up in blinding snow and wind to plot course and drive pigils. Visibility very poor. Nigel whined.
- Turned back at noon, reached Verandah Camp at 3 pip emma.
- 2/29. Driving rain and wind. Omu Ba drunk since 2/27. What on? Stove alcohol found to be low. Inventive but undisciplined. Chastisement difficult in circumstances.
- 2/30. Robert roped right up to the NE Overhang. Forced to turn back by Sherbets' dread of occupants, Insuperable superstition. We must eliminate plans for that route and go straight for the Drain Pipe. We cannot endure much longer here crowded up in this camp without newspapers. There is not room for six men in our tent and we hear the sixteen Sherbets fighting continually in theirs. I see now that the group is unnecessarily numerous even if some are under 5 foot 2 inches in height. Ten men, hand picked, would be enough. Visibility zero all day. Snow, rain, wind.
- 2/31. Hail, sleet, fog. Three Sherbets have gone missing.
- 3/1. Out of Bovril. Derek very low.
- 3/4. Missed entries during blizzard. Today bright sun, no wind. Snow dazzling on lower elevations; from here we cannot see the heights. Sherbets returned from unexplained absence with Ovaltine. Spirits high. Digging out and making ready all day for ascent (two groups) tomorrow.

3/5. Success! We are on the Verandah Roof! View overwhelming. Unattained summit of 2618 clearly visible in the SE. Second Party (Peter, Robert, eight Sherbets) not here yet. Windy and exposed camp site on steep slope. Shingles slippery with rain and sleet.

3/6. Nigel and two Sherbets went back down to the North Edge to meet Second Party. Returned 4 pip emma without having sighted them. They must have been delayed at Verandah Camp. Anxiety. Radio silent. Wind rising.

3/7. Colin strained shoulder on rope climbing up to the Window. Stupid, childish prank. Whether or not there are occupants, the Sherbets are very strong on not disturbing them. No sign of Second Party. Radio messages enigmatic, constant interference from KWJJ Country Music Station. Windy, but clear weather holds.

3/8. Resolved to go up tomorrow if weather holds. Mended doggles, replaced worn pigil-holders. Sherbets non-committal.

3/9. I am alone on the High Roof.

No one else willing to continue ascent. Colin and Nigel will wait for me three days at Verandah Roof Camp, Derek and four Sherbets began descent to Base. I set off with two Sherbets at 5 ack emma. Fine sunrise, in East, at 7:04 ack emma. Climbed steadily all day. Tricky bit at last overhang. Sherbets very plucky. Omu Ba while swinging on rope said, "Observe fine view, sah!" Exhausted at arrival at High Roof Camp, but the three advance Sherbets had tents set up and Ovaltine ready. Slope so steep here I feel I may roll off in my sleep!

Sherbets singing in their tent.

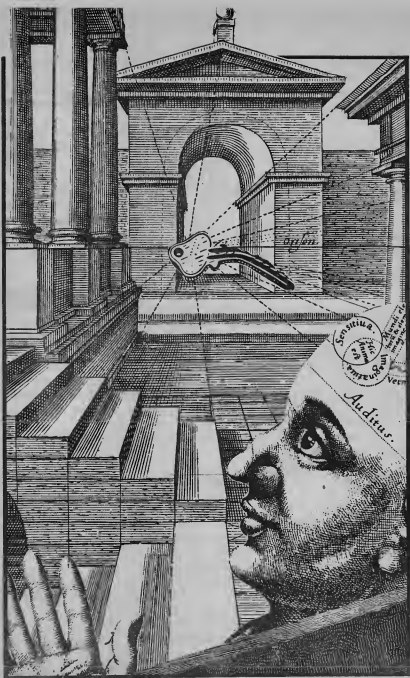
Above me the sharp Summit, and the Chimney rising sheer against the stars.

That is the last entry in Simon Interthwaite's journal.

Four of the five Sherbets with him at the High Roof Camp returned after three days to the Base Camp. They brought the journal, two clean vests, and a tube of anchovy paste back with them. Their report of his fate was incoherent. The Interthwaite Party abandoned the attempt to scale the North Face of 2647 Vine Street and returned to Calcutta.

In 1980 a Japanese party of Izutsu employees with four Sherbet guides attained the summit by a North Face route, rappelling across the study windows and driving pitons clear up to the eaves. Occupant protest was ineffective.

No one has yet climbed the Chimney. ●



GREAT art: Marc Yankus by Martin Gardner **MOMENTS IN** **PSEUDOSCIENCE**

Readers will recognize Mr. Gardner as our long-time contributor of frustrating mathematical puzzles and brainteasers. Others will know him from his long association with *Scientific American*. Still others will fondly remember his *Annotated Alice* or Mathematical Games books. And, of course, there are those (like the editor) who are fascinated by his work with the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. Read on for more on the dreaded CSICOP!

Nobody knows just why, since World War II, Americans have become so increasingly obsessed by pseudoscience and the paranormal. Decay of traditional religions? Anxiety

over how science is shaping the future? Deterioration of science teaching? Whatever the causes, SF has been strongly influenced by the trend, and to some extent has reinforced it.

Before proceeding, we must

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make an all-important distinction. Believing in a pseudoscience is not the same as enjoying imaginary science in science fiction. *The Time Machine* is a classic, but don't imagine for a moment that H. G. Wells took time travel seriously. Yes, all things may be possible in some far-off millennium, but the great SF writers who use such devices as time travel, parallel worlds, space warps, inertial drives, popping in and out of black and white holes, levitation, antigravity, matter transmission machines, extraterrestrial UFOs, mind swaps, reincarnation, and assorted powers of psi have seldom confused these marvels with serious science. I can assure you that the good doctor Asimov does not believe in the psychohistory so essential to his *Foundation* series, that Lester Del Rey does not believe in the ESP and precognition so essential to his entertaining novel *Pstalemate*. Commenting on his many stories involving ESP, Larry Niven once had this to say: "The fact is that I wrote them in the belief that



"Unorthodox theories, obviously essential to the health and progress of science, are qualitatively different from theories so contrary to accepted science, so unsupported by adequate evidence, that the probability of their being true is practically zero. This is not to deny that pseudoscience fades along spectrums that lead to reputable science. Day fades into night, but there is a difference between day and night."

no such thing existed. I wrote stories of magic for the same reason: I found the ideas interesting."

The same goes for intelligent readers of SF and fantasy. You don't have to believe in "the force" to enjoy *Star Wars*, or in extraterrestrial visitors to enjoy *E.T.* You don't have to believe in parallel worlds or telepathy to enjoy Wells's greatest SF novel, *Men Like Gods*. But there is a dark side to the use of pseudoscience in SF. I refer to those few writers, and not-so-few readers, who lack the training to distinguish good science from bad and who have been caught up in the current occult mania.

Consider the sad story of John Campbell, Jr. After his friend L. Ron Hubbard reportedly cured his sinusitis, Campbell launched in *Astounding* the astounding discovery of Dianetics. As we all know, it became the flourishing cult of Scientology. Soon Campbell was just as enthusiastically promoting such idiocies as the Hieronymous psionic machine

and the Dean space drive. These were more than just circulation-boosting gimmicks. Campbell truly believed. He may have been a great editor, but his knowledge of hard science was as minimal as his gullibility was unbounded. He became a passionate devotee of the paranormal. During the fifties it was not easy to sell him a story unless it concerned super-psi powers.

Campbell's friend A. E. van Vogt was equally naive. Count Alfred Korzybski's once popular cult of General Semantics underpinned his two null-A novels. *Siege of the Unseen* exploited the useless Bates system of curing visual ailments by wiggling your eyeballs. After his conversion to Dianetics, van Vogt abandoned writing to become one of Hubbard's top Hollywood auditors. When I attacked Dianetics in my old *Fads and Fallacies* book, van Vogt wrote to warn me that my hostilities would soon cause serious heart disease and crippling arthritis, and that only Dianetic therapy could avert such disasters. Today, thirty years later, my

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heart and joints are in fine shape, thank you, but van Vogt's mind and career were seriously crippled by Hubbard's nonsense.

Second only to Campbell in his baleful influence on SF was Ray Palmer, the strange little gnome who edited *Amazing Stories*. Although Palmer, unlike Campbell, knew he was promoting garbage, he convinced thousands of adolescent fans that evil deros actually live underground in vast corridors reachable by secret elevators. Palmer played a major role, still largely unrecognized, in starting the flying-saucer mania. He founded *Fate* magazine. The first article ever published about modern UFOs ("The Truth About the Flying Saucers," by Kenneth Arnold who began it all) appeared in Vol. 1, No. 1, of *Fate*, April 1946. *Fate* still thrives as the country's leading purveyor of paranormal hogwash.

It is hard to believe, but not until 1976 did a periodical spring into existence that would survey contemporary pseudoscience from a

scientifically literate point of view. Here is how it came about. Paul Kurtz, a philosopher at the State University of New York, at Buffalo, was the moving force. Polls had shown that about one-fourth of the American people believe that the stars influence their lives. Kurtz thought it might be worthwhile to draft a manifesto condemning astrology and to have it signed by leading scientists. The overwhelmingly favorable response to the publication of this document in *The Humanist*, then edited by Kurtz, suggested that a great hunger existed for informed, skeptical evaluations of the surging irrationalisms.

At this time psychologist Ray Hyman, magician James Randi, and I (we three are old friends) had been toying with the notion of starting an organization that would provide the media with useful information counter to the occult trend. But we had no funds. Somehow Kurtz found out about us, and about some 30 others of like mind. In 1976 we all met in Buffalo, at

a meeting sponsored by the American Humanist Association, and so was born the notorious group known as CSICOP (we pronounce it "Sigh-cop"). The letters stand for The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

The first issue of our official journal (Fall 1976) was called *The Zetetic*, a Greek word for skeptic. After three issues edited by sociologist Marcello Truzzi, it became apparent that deep philosophical differences separated the editorial leanings of Truzzi from the desires of the other committee members. We wanted a magazine of open advocacy, one that would take a firm stand against the more preposterous forms of modern pseudoscience. Truzzi believed that even extreme cranks such as Velikovsky should be treated with respect. He wanted the magazine to establish dialogs between skeptics and true believers, to present both sides of current controversies. In brief, he wanted a magazine with an objective, neutral tone, in contrast to what he derided as

mere "debunking."

The rest of us did not regard debunking as such a negative word. We felt that when pseudoscience is far enough out on the fringes of irrationalism, it is fair game for humor and at times even ridicule.

Now we must pause for another important distinction. Unorthodox theories, obviously essential to the health and progress of science, are qualitatively different from theories so contrary to accepted science, so unsupported by adequate evidence, that the probability of their being true is practically zero. This is not to deny that pseudoscience fades along spectrums that lead to reputable science. Day fades into night, but there is a difference between day and night.

When, for example, a dentist claims he can put silver and gold fillings into teeth by paranormal means, without drilling, or a journalist of the occult writes a book about how the dead communicate with the living by telephone, we feel no

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obligation to treat such outlandish claims with solemn respect. On the other hand, when unorthodox claims are less extreme, we treat them seriously and try to present the evidence against them without ridicule.

The fact is that crazy, outlandish speculations by reputable scientists are constantly published in "establishment" journals. This is particularly the case in cosmology and subatomic physics where theories almost have to be far out to be fruitful. At the moment the outstanding unorthodoxy in evolution theory is the "punctuated equilibrium" approach advocated by Stephen J. Gould and others. We would never dream of trying to "debunk" this theory. Indeed, Gould is one of our active committee "fellows." On the other hand we do not hesitate to oppose the flood theory of fossils advocated by today's leading creationists because their arguments are in a different ball park, revealing an almost total ignorance of the most elementary levels of modern

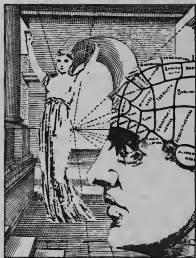
geology.

After a few issues of *The Zetetic*, Truzzi resigned from the Committee to publish his own journal, *The Zetetic Scholar*. To avoid confusion we changed the name of our magazine to *The Skeptical Inquirer*. Twenty-one issues have now appeared, the magazine runs to 80 pages, and circulation is steadily rising. The editor, Kendrick Frazier, is an experienced science writer who formerly edited *Science News*.

Kurtz continues to be the committee's energetic chairman, with Lee Nisbet as executive director. The "fellows" are too numerous to list them all, but they include many eminent philosophers, scientists, and writers. Among SF writers, Isaac Asimov and L. Sprague de Camp are fellows. And many more experts serve as scientific consultants.

To convey our magazine's flavor, let me give a rundown on the Winter 1982-83 issue. The news section opens with a lighthearted report by our Amsterdam correspondent, Piet Hein Hoebens, on last

August's international conference of the Society for Psychical Research, at Cambridge. British parapsychologist Susan Blackmore, Hoebens writes, "dropped a little bombshell" by announcing her conversion to skepticism. For years, she told a startled audience, she had tried to catch a glimpse of the occult, but "whenever I started to look into psi seriously, the evidence started to disappear."



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must understand, was said to account only *in part* for the bending! One guest fainted after twisting his spoon. When our correspondent bent a spoon effortlessly, a believer hopped up and down in excitement over the fact that it worked even for skeptics!

Perhaps I should add that most cutlery bends much more easily than people realize. After all, how often have you tried to bend a spoon? One of Uri Geller's basic secrets is that he or one of his unknown assistants gets access in advance to the test spoons and secretly bends one back and forth many times until the metal is weakened and just about to snap. Later, Uri will pick out the prepared spoon, and of course it bends like putty when he strokes it with one finger.

On other pseudoscientific fronts, there was a revival in China last year (as another news item in the same issue reports) of what was called "dermo-optical perception" in the early 1960s when there was a rash of claims that Soviet psychic ladies could "see" without using their eyes.

In China it took the form of children who claimed that while blindfolded they could read with their hands, feet, nose, ears, and even their armpits. There are many different ways of cheating. The simplest is based on the fact that it is almost impossible to blindfold someone, even with tape over the eyes, without allowing a clever charlatan to obtain a tiny aperture that permits a peek down the side of the nose. A "nose peek" of what is written on a piece of paper is obtained under cover of misdirection, then the paper is wadded into a ball, tucked into an ear or under an armpit, and the message "read" with the skin. The late Rosa Kulashova, who started it all in Russia, liked to read messages by sitting on them, thus proving that her behind was also optically perceptive. Soviet psychic researchers were much impressed. If you are interested in more details, read the chapter on dermo-optical perception in my Avon paperback, *Science: Good, Bad and Bogus*.

Another news item tells of

the fiasco in Atlanta when renowned psychic Dorothy Allison failed to find the long-wanted murderer. Allison's secret is to chatter for hours to the police, giving scores of possible leads. If one later proves to be on the mark, she can truthfully trumpet the claim that she actually said what she did. Of course she doesn't mention the numerous other statements that were wrong. In the Atlanta case, a police officer told Randi that the "whacko broad" had given the department some 42 names. As luck would have it, not one was right.

Newspapers, radio, and television had a field day last August when a woman in Chicago was said to have burst into flames while walking down a sidewalk. Paul Harvey, especially excited by this event, described other cases of "spontaneous human combustion" alleged to have occurred in the past. It later turned out, as the *Skeptical Inquirer* reveals (you probably didn't see this in any newspaper), that the poor woman had been dead for 12

hours before her scorched body was found, and her clothing had been doused with gasoline. There are no authenticated cases of human spontaneous combustion, and any chemist can tell you why. In fact, human corpses are extremely difficult to burn even with the aid of flammable liquids and a match, as thousands of murderers have discovered to their dismay when they tried to dispose of a body.

Another interesting item pulls together outstanding instances of earthquake predictions by famous psychics that totally fizzled. Jeane Dixon, to give one, told the *National Enquirer* in 1964 that there would be a great California quake in 1965 or 1966. It didn't happen, but like all psychic prophets Dixon knows that only the rare hits are remembered. In 1968 she tried again. "A mammoth earthquake," she said, would occur on the West Coast in "about seven years." Edgar Cayce had an even worse record of failed quake predictions. Of course with psychics predicting big quakes

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every year, eventually one of them is certain to make a sensational hit. For the record, I here predict a major quake along the San Andreas Fault in the fall of this year. If it doesn't happen, who will recall what I said?

In the same issue of our magazine, there are five major articles. An anthropologist gives a scholarly history of palmistry. A Scottish architect presents strong evidence that recent photos of the Loch Ness monster are no more than pictures of floating logs. A psychologist speculates on why skeptics are skeptical. Author-editor Philip Klass, who heads our subcommittee on ufology, tells a wild tale about his efforts to track down an alleged color photograph of a UFO. And I have a paper on "How Not to Test a Psychic." It goes into unpublished details about a famous test of Uri Geller, at Stanford Research International, in which he reportedly guessed correctly, eight times out of ten, the number on a die shaken in a file box. Another

item reports on Reverend Sun Myung Moon's stirring announcement that he often speaks (in Korean) to Moses, Buddha, and Jesus. Two books are reviewed at length, nine get brief reviews, and 17 recent articles of special interest are referenced with comments. There are letters from readers, cartoons, and other things intended to amuse and inform.

Are you fed up with the flood of paranormal crap that oozes from your TV set and off the movie screens and the pages of irresponsible newspapers and magazines? Are you bored by the shabby science that never stops coming from cynical book publishers who would rather make a fast buck than ask experts to evaluate a manuscript and heed their advice? If so, come join our ranks. The cost of *The Skeptical Inquirer* is \$16.50 for a year's four issues, and the address is Box 229, Central Park Station, Buffalo, NY 14215. ●

If you care to learn more about the views of those on *The Skeptical Inquirer's* editorial board, here is a selected reading list. Paul Kurtz has written and edited many books of philosophy, the latest being an anthology of essays titled *Sidney Hook: Philosopher of Democracy and Humanism*. Ray Hyman is the author of *The Nature of Psychological Inquiry*, and coauthor of the only sensible book on dowsing, *Water Witching USA*. Randi has written two attacks on fraudulent psychics: *The Magic of Uri Geller* and *Film-Flam! My Science: Good, Bad and Bogus* was reprinted this year as an Avon paperback.

Philip Klass is the world's leading skeptical expert on UFOs. His last book, *UFOs Explained*, should be read by every SF fan who still takes ufology seriously. George Abell is the author of several astronomy textbooks, and coeditor of *Science and the Paranormal* in which you will find many essays by fellows of CSICOP. Kendrick Frazier wrote *Our Turbulent Sun*, and edited *Paranormal Borderlands of Science*, a selection of articles from *The Skeptical Inquirer*.

Books by CSICOP fellows run to many hundreds, about half of them written, of course, by Isaac Asimov. Of special relevance are: *Parapsychology: Science or Magic*, by Canadian psychologist James Alcock; *UFOs: A Scientific Debate*, coedited by Carl Sagan; *The UFO Verdict*, by Robert Schaefer; and several books on psychic fraud by magician Milbourne Christopher.





OUT OF THE WOMB

by Kim Antieau

The author is a graduate of the 1980 Clarion Workshop. This story is the prologue to a novel she's in the process of completing, tentatively titled *Killian*. By the time this appears, she and her husband, SF writer Mario Milosevic, will have moved to the Oregon coast where they plan to "listen to the ocean and write until their fingers drop off."

art: Odbert

We began with a killing.

It was slow and painful, but we killed our planet and left it disemboweled for other stars. Traveling through a space that wrapped us in blackness and in light, we forgot our destination, forgot the killing, and stayed contentedly encapsulated in the great ship *Mercury* for generations.

And in our womb, stories of the first Mercurians were allowed to grow unfettered into fabulous legends. Allyn Bacon, the first captain of the ship, was our biggest hero. Tall and red-haired, he could carry four children on each arm while bringing *Mercury* out of any skirmish unscathed. One time, the ship suddenly went out of control, weaving and sputtering through the universe like a drunken mule. Captain Bacon climbed outside, unwrapped a length of steel cable from around his waist, and lassoed the nearest planet. He held the ship steady until the engineers could make repairs.

The firstborn of the *Mercury* was Mary Leunen. Her mother was a first-rate engineer, and her father was unknown. Ship mythology told of the ship's spirit who crept into Karen one night

and caused Mary to be born. From the time she was an hour old until she died, Mary had a bush of extraordinary silver hair and eyes the color of blue steel. She came to know the ship better than any person alive. She could sense days ahead of time when something was about to go awry, and she would know how to fix it. She lived a long time, and one day, when she decided she'd lived long enough, she crawled outside of the *Mercury*. She stood on the hull and opened her arms to the universe. Her long silver hair froze into marble locks that trailed behind her and mingled with the dust of the cosmos; her feet curled down deep into the metal until she truly became a part of the ship.

There was also Sarah Eirick. She discovered how to accelerate the growth of certain foods without loss of nutritional value. Micaela Miranda steered the ship safely out of a potentially devastating meteor shower. William MacKenzie lost his life saving twenty children when the room they were in began to decompress unexpectedly.

And then there was Father Cary, who prayed for us to repent while he reprogrammed the computer until all navigational traces of the planet we left were gone. "We must not be tempted to return to destroy again." After his deed was done, he let himself out by the escape hatch, leaving the message: "The stars are for the gods, and we are trespassing, my children. You must find a place from where you can look up."

Father Cary was a Colonist, and he and others like him (including my parents) believed the purpose of the *Mercury* was to find a habitable planet for us to live on. He was not a popular man, and I didn't hear about him in school where I learned about the others. Instead, my parents would tell me Father Cary stories late at night when most children were asleep. I would lie under the covers listening and wiggling my toes in fear. I couldn't understand why anyone would want to leave the ship: Father Cary and, sometimes, my parents were strange to me. After their nighttime stories, my parents would leave me, whispering, "She's asleep," and then I would hear their voices coming from the other room. They spoke of a killing again, and I waited for the death.

I lived in his world until I was almost twelve, and then things on the ship began to change—or else I had grown old enough to notice them. My parents were often away at meetings attempting a negotiation between the Counselors and the Colonists. My parents felt anyone had the right to leave the ship if he or she wished. The Counselors (who made the laws and governed the ship) dis-

agreed. It was a debate that had been going on for decades, and I assumed it would continue for countless more decades. While my parents were gone, I worked on the farm. My parents felt that a knowledge of agriculture would increase my chances of survival planetside. They urged me to listen and learn. I worked on the farm and watched and told my parents I didn't intend to ever leave the ship. I did some experimenting on the farm, and my teachers were convinced I could sprout plants from metal.

My parents were pleased. I waited.

I waited, as all children of *Mercury* would. It was said we were gifted with extraordinary patience. We had never seen a sun rise or set, hadn't seen any landscape turn from green to brown with the changing of the seasons; we didn't know how water hung in the air like sheets of invisible perspiration on humid days, nor had we felt the dry sandy air of a desert day. Things changed slowly for us, if at all. The ship was all we had known. It was all my parents had known, and their parents, and my great-grandparents, until our ancestry seemed like a biblical chant of who begot whom. Change was an event, an unwelcome event. We were taught to believe in stability. *Mercury* survived only if all systems were stable.

One evening, when my parents came home, arms around each other, their faces ashen, I felt the stability of my world being threatened. I knew the long discussion between the Counselors and the Colonists had ended. My heartbeat quickened. I hoped and prayed my parents had lost their fight.

"They won't let us leave," my father told me quietly. "We are trapped in this coffin forever."

I wrapped my arms around my legs and emptied my lungs with a sigh of relief. I was convinced that everything would be normal again and I wouldn't have to worry about leaving.

We had a party on my twelfth birthday. My friends gathered around a planet game board and screamed with glee every time a hostile creature was destroyed. My parents and their friends sat talking at a table away from us. I looked up from the board once and caught a look on my mother's face that frightened me. I knew some irrevocable thing had been done that night, and I resented it. It was my day, my party, and I felt all my ignorance and innocence slipping from me because of my parents and the beliefs they held.

"It is time," my mother said.

My father's hand rested on her shoulder. "The Counselors have

made their decision; now we must act," he said. "They were warned. We will not be kept against our will."

The other adults were quiet, staring at my parents. The children laughed, and the adults stared. I felt like I was at a holomovie that had malfunctioned. On my right was the comedy, and on my left was something almost totally alien to me, yet skin familiar. When my parents sent me to bed that night, they both hugged me tightly—so tightly I almost cried out. "Remember, Carey, we do what we think is right." I pushed them away from me and ran to my room.

On *Mercury* we fear little—or pretend we do. We don't have to deal with many dangers, so we boast of our bravery. There is a thing, however, that everyone on board is terrified of: fire. Picture yourself in a small box. Now drop a match and watch the yellow flames slap the walls. Try to get out. In a fire, *Mercury* becomes to all of us what it already was to my father—a giant coffin.

We have a sprinkler system, and most small rooms can be depressurized. It is even possible to close off entire sections of the ship in case of fire or any other catastrophe so that the ship is not destroyed because one section is damaged. Nevertheless, fires are dreaded. It was not without great forethought that the Colonists set a fire in a storage room on the morning after my birthday. By the end of the day, five small fires had been set and, luckily, controlled.

The routines of the ship became chaotic. The ventilation system overworked itself and coughed out putrid-smelling air. Walls were scarred with soot. For days, cleaning crews cluttered the hallways with their bodies and equipment.

The Counselors called the violence an outrage, said it went against everything the colony stood for. The Colonists sent the leaders a message, telling them it was they, the Counselors, who had forgotten the colony's purpose.

I hid in my room, pulled the blankets up around me, and cried. My parents sat in the other room, discussing strategies.

The Counselors convened a special session to review their decision on planetary colonies and to decide how to deal with the Colonists. After several hours of debate, they announced their decision over the video. My father leaned slightly against my mother as they listened to the Senior Counselor, Nenad Sormas.

"We restate our position on planetary colonies: no persons will be allowed to leave the ship for purposes of colonization. It would be harmful to the operation of *Mercury*," he said, reading from a paper. "It has also been determined that the group of religious

fanatics who call themselves the Colonists"—here Mr. Sormas looked up from his paper and seemed to stare directly into the faces of my parents—"is detrimental to the well-being of the ship and her passengers. All members will either turn themselves over to security willingly or be prepared for arrest."

I sat next to the video away from my parents. I could barely believe that I was related to these people, who were trying to destroy my home. I was suddenly glad they'd be arrested. They were crazy.

The door of the apartment slid open, and four security guards stepped in. They led my parents away without even letting them say goodbye to me. I was directed to stay in our rooms until someone came to get me.

Then I was alone.

I was taken to my mother's sister's home, three storeys above our own. My mother and Alex had never been close, and early on I realized I was an intrusion in her household. She cautioned me not to poison my twin cousins with my "Colonist propaganda." For their part, my cousins ignored me and chattered constantly between themselves.

I slept on a fold-out bed in the living room. The first night I lay staring into blackness feeling small and lonely. My anger with my parents had dissipated. I tried telling myself their imprisonment was for the safety of the ship, but I found little comfort in that and wondered about my own safety. I closed my eyes again and again, and each time I heard my parents telling me of the Colonists, telling me that every one of the original passengers on the ship believed as they believed. Father Cary had been right, right, right.

I turned my face to the wall, away from the unfamiliar room. Father Cary was a madman who thought himself a god. I shut out the voices and tried to sleep.

Normality never returned to the ship or to my life. My school friends harassed me, my cousins didn't speak to me, and my aunt ceaselessly pointed out the absurdity of the Colonists' plan. I missed my parents and cried at night when no one was near. My parents were not allowed visitors while the investigators continued questioning them—about what I was never sure. Each day I waited for someone to contact me to let me see them, but no one did. I tried to imagine what their days were like, but I had no experience with imprisonment. In fact, most of the hundreds of thousands of Mercurians had no conception of prison, though my father said we were all virtual prisoners of the Counselors. I had

read of prisons on our home planet: damp dark cells where green slime dripped off the walls and rats nested in prisoners' hair. But *Mercury* was far more civilized than that, and I was fairly confident they were all right.

At supper one evening, my aunt began a new tirade against the Colonists. Though her arguments were frequent, I had not grown accustomed to them.

"It would be suicide if they left the ship," she said. I was stirring my food and not eating. "I hope you harbor no Colonists' views, Carey." She had asked me the same question innumerable times in the week I had spent with her.

"Alex," I said, sounding as old and cold as I could. "I am not a Colonist, nor do I share their views; however, my parents and their people have every right to do as they wish. If they desire suicide, then let them die."

The four at the table stopped and stared at me. I glared back, wanting to slap every one of their faces, slap them for taking me into their home and then looking down on me as if I were some poor, depraved relative.

"This is supposed to be a free society," I added. With that, I stood up from the table and walked out of the apartment. I stood tall and firm, wanting my parents to be proud of me. When the doors closed behind me, I felt once again like my world was crumbling under my feet. I ran and ran, the tears nearly blinding me as I went; I stumbled down the corridors, down stairs, around corners, running and running, finally falling exhausted, alone near the Scoop. I huddled in a dark, greasy-smelling corner and felt the Core of the ship heaving next to me, drawing space debris inside and converting it into useful energy. I felt a part of the engine, the ship, the legends of *Mercury*. This was my home, and I never wanted to leave it. "I am of this ship," I cried, "and the ship is of the universe." Father Cary was wrong. The warm sighing of *Mercury* soothed me into sleep and I lay next to the Core all night, dreaming of Mary Leunen.

The next day I went back to my apartment. I didn't go to school, leaving a message that I was ill, and then I went to the Rehab Center to see my parents.

"I'm sick and need to see my mother, Clarissa Benson," I told the chief therapist.

"There are other doctors," she said. She was a tall, heavy woman who I imagined beat her prisoners into rehabilitation.

"Please, let me see her; other doctors scare me," I pleaded. I tried to act younger than I was, slouching my shoulders to hide

my new breasts and biting my fingernails. Feigned tears rimmed my eyes. She finally sat down at the terminal and reviewed my mother's record.

"You were due to be called in tomorrow," she said. "I suppose there's no harm in letting you in early."

I thanked her and followed her down long white hallways. I heard people talking and laughing. Most of the prisoners roamed the halls of the center freely, knowing an alarm was set off the second someone stepped out of bounds.

My parents and the other Colonists were imprisoned in a separate wing. We walked for a long while down hallways that grew increasingly narrow. Finally, the therapist opened a door, and I was facing my parents. I hardly heard the woman tell me she'd return when it was time to leave.

I felt as if I had been separated from my parents for years, so I was genuinely amazed to find they looked the same. My father touched my hair and took my hand; my mother kissed my forehead. I began to cry. Forgetting completely that they were the prisoners and I was free, I told them how terrible my life was, what monsters my cousins were, and asked why they didn't confess to everything so they could come home.

My father lifted me onto his lap like he used to do when I was younger and held me close.

"We have never told you to believe as we do," my father said gently. "Nor should you tell us how we should live. We know this is hard on you, Carey."

"When you are older, you'll understand," my mother said. I looked up at her angrily, and for a brief moment I hated her.

"As a people we're stagnating within this ship," my father said, pulling me back to him. "We need to see new worlds. Explore. Live actively. We left our world for a new one, promising ourselves we would make up for the destruction we caused. This is something your mother and I believe very strongly in."

"We didn't do anything wrong," I said. "That all happened hundreds of years ago. Why should it matter now?"

"We are not hurting *Mercury* by leaving," he said, stroking my hair. "There are not enough of us to deplete the work force. . . ."

I had heard it all before and didn't care. I wanted my parents back, and nothing else mattered.

My parents were never given a trial; instead the Counselors assumed they were guilty and attempted to rehabilitate them and the other Colonists. I was allowed to visit them once every few days. I took them books, and we talked. I was very happy those

weeks, though I didn't realize it until years later: for once, I had my parents all to myself. My father told me again of his dream to become a farmer. I pointed out that his daughter was already a farmer, and she had never left the ship. He laughed. "I want to be a different kind of farmer. I want the sunshine to burn my eyes and bake my skin." I said it sounded to me like he wanted to be a pot roast. We laughed and they hugged me and I forgot they were in prison, away from me.

I stayed in our apartment. My aunt never reported I had left her, and the school seemed likewise uninterested in my absences. When I wasn't at the farm—where I could work alone—I was with my parents.

With Freedom Day approaching, my parents were given leave to come home with me for two weeks. Freedom Day was the most important Mercurian holiday (the day the ship went into space), and most every year prisoners are allowed to go home. I was surprised that my parents were released, too, but I asked no questions. We went to holomovies, visited the animals, played planet games. I took them to the farm and showed them my work. We ignored the stares of others and had a good time.

Then one day, people began to come over to the apartment. They frightened me, because I knew my parents had been forbidden to congregate. I went to my room so I wouldn't hear them, but I found myself listening at the door anyway. Someone had heard that a few of the Counselors were favoring the Colonists; they were tired of keeping them imprisoned and fearful of more violence from the Colonists who hadn't been arrested. The talk went on all day and into the night. No one came to arrest my parents.

The next morning, my parents asked me if I would go with them if the Counselors reversed their earlier decision. I was quiet for a few minutes, wondering if I could ever make such a choice. I finally told them I didn't know.

"We have some work to do today," my mother said. "Why don't you spend a few hours at the farm, and when you come home, we'll have a nice dinner."

I hadn't been to the farm in nearly two weeks. I didn't want to leave my parents, since their time at home was almost up, but I did as my mother asked. A few hours later I was informed that my parents had died in an explosion. It was said later, when tales were told, that my cry was heard throughout the ship and the Core trembled in sympathy as I fell to the floor.

I never learned what caused the explosion. The Counselors said

my parents were manufacturing a bomb. The Colonists claimed the Counselors planted the bomb. Most likely, my parents were experimenting on some sort of explosive device and something went wrong. They had been desperate people, using desperate tactics.

As punishment for their acts of violence, the surviving Colonists were sentenced for removal. Upon locating the nearest habitable planet, the Colonists, along with their families—willing and unwilling—were to be deposited planetside. One of the old scout ships was refitted for the job. In addition, the Counselors decided the two hundred or so "habitual" criminals were to accompany them. Each group would be dropped in a different area. They were given supplies: food, medicine, limited computers. This was to help them get through the first few months. Mr. Sormas looked old and tired as he read the announcement, probably certain he was sending six hundred people to their deaths. There could be no appeals; the decision was final.

I stood by as my parents' remains were jettisoned into space. I was glad they would rest amongst the stars. I kissed their memories and said goodbye.

The Counselors decided I was to leave *Mercury* as well. Since I was the offspring of the Colonists' leaders, it was only right.

We left. *Mercury* instantly became part of the darkness. The blue and green globe which was to become my home rushed toward us until it was all. I closed my eyes and thought of the stories, of Allyn Bacon and his steel lasso; of Mary and her silver hair. Now my parents would be part of the legends. . . .

. . . Clarissa could cure anyone of any disease. She was dark and lithe and preached against the evils of lethargy. Her husband Brian cried for freedom and saw none. When a mad terrorist planted a bomb to destroy the credibility of the Colonists, Brian and Clarissa clasped hands and threw themselves over the weapon. Thus, with their lives, they saved the *Mercury*. The grateful Counselors permitted the Colonists to leave for a planet of their choosing. . . .

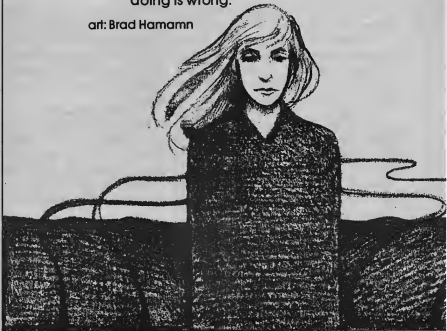
I opened my eyes. Maybe there would be no stories for a time. No matter. I would remember. I'd stand spread-legged on the earth and let the sun bake my skin and burn my eyes. Maybe they'd tell stories of me, Carey, the daughter of Brian and Clarissa, who was lonely on the new world: She left her people one day and climbed the highest mountain to be close to the stars. It was said that the stars reached down and touched her, and she rejoiced, for she felt she was home once again. ●

IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

by Frank Ward

This is Frank Ward's second appearance in *Asfm*. His first, "Memo," was in our July 1982 issue. He says this story grew out of the emotional state that arose when he first became a father, a little over two years ago: "the intrinsic desire to do everything right for your child and the latent fear that everything you're doing is wrong."

art: Brad Hamann





Jefferies caught a glimpse of it out the shuttle window. Cargo handlers, evac units, telemetry crews. But only one personnel carrier.

In those few seconds as he took it all in, the shuttle made its pass, looped high over the far end of the strip, and then dropped like a dying bird to its landing. The jolt of impact was impressive. Even the small boy sitting at his side acknowledged it with a momentary look of terror before lapsing back into his vacant expression.

No red-carpet treatment, Jefferies thought as the orbital vehicle rolled on for the distance necessary to shed the last of the velocity from the two-hundred-mile fall. They would be riding back to the headquarters building with the two pilots and the four replacements that were on board, all of them jammed elbow to elbow and smelling each other's perspiration. It was intentional, and Jefferies could sense the hostility in the gesture.

He's going to be as uncooperative as he can. The conclusion was obvious, might as well have been a message painted on the concrete. *This is my command. Tread lightly.*

Jefferies congratulated himself. So far, so good.

The shuttle's forward motion ceased. The replacements released the harnesses that tied them to the seats. Conversation returned to the cabin for the first time since the shuttle had started the descent.

"Damn, they're trying to kill us before we even get here," commented a dark, congenial corporal who seemed to be the unofficial leader of the group. "It's bad enough they stick us in the armpit of the universe. Nobody mentioned they were going to try to make us two feet shorter with the landing."

Nervous laughter sputtered through the group as they took turns trying to get a view of Mau Ty out of the observation windows. There was little to see other than a rose sky and a few oddly shaped clusters of indigenous plants that grew beyond the runway.

"Excuse me, Commissioner." The corporal leaned over the seats to Jefferies. "Mind if I see what the view's like from this side?"

"Of course not." Jefferies pressed back as the soldier stretched across the width of the two seats and pressed his face close to the glass.

"About the same." The soldier pulled back and sat on the arm of the outer seat. The young boy seated there took no notice of him. "Well, you never know about a place from the way it looks. At least it's warm. My last post we froze every time we went out.

Lousy place. Never did figure out what the Corps was doing there."

Jefferies began to listen more closely. Noncoms were often good sources of information. "Surely it must have been something worthwhile," he suggested. "Terraforming, mineral survey . . ."

The corporal gave a noncommittal shrug.

"There was no heavy equipment in sight, and I never went out with a single survey crew. Spent all my time on routine S & C patrols and playing gin. That and freezing my ass off."

Jefferies made a mental note to pull the corporal's service file when he got back for the name of that previous assignment. It had all the trappings of a boondoggle.

A tone of conspiratorial camaraderie crept into the corporal's voice. "I suppose the CO here really went through the ceiling when he heard you were coming. You guys don't know what kind of effect you have on a base."

That's ridiculous, thought Jefferies. He reflected the man's casual attitude back to him. "Im sure it's not as bad as all that. Besides, this is an unofficial situation. Actually we're just here on a vacation of sorts."

"No offense, sir, but with the Commission, nothing's unofficial as far as a CO's concerned. But me, I'll take your word for it. One of the nice things about being a noncom is that you get to take things as they are, you know what I mean?"

"I do indeed, Corporal."

The sound of the evac units, their pumps emptying the last dregs of fuel from the tanks, began to carry through the hull of the ship as a dull vibration. Jefferies looked out the window again. The cargo handlers had moved in closer, awaiting the all-clear signal. Behind them sat the single personnel carrier.

"So what's your name, son?"

The corporal had spoken to the boy in the seat beside Jefferies. After a few moments, he asked again. This time the face rose, locked eyes with the soldier for an instant, then returned to staring at the back of the seat in front of them.

"It's Steven," Jefferies interjected. "My son."

The corporal hooked an index finger under the boy's chin and flicked it good-naturedly.

"Kind of shy, aren't you?" he said, his voice all ease and reassurance. He obviously prided himself on his way with children. "How old are you? Ten? Eleven?"

"Actually he's thirteen." Jefferies studied the soldier across from him. As good a place as any to start. The man was talkative

and likable. Throughout his career, Jefferies had seen hundreds like him, all having one trait in common—they offered their thoughts to the world readily, and without reservation. Definitely a place to start.

"Quiet little guy, isn't he?" There was an expectant look on the corporal's face.

"He's been ill recently. Had to spend a great deal of time in the hospital. Crowds and strangers still bother him, I'm afraid."

The corporal's eyes flickered acknowledgment.

"That's a good portion of the reason we're here," the commissioner continued. "The doctors suggested a vacation away from all of that. Someplace quiet, few people, and a great deal of room."

"Well, you picked the perfect place, sir. There can't be more than a few hundred men spread over the entire ball."

Six hundred twenty-seven attached personnel. The figure came involuntarily to mind as the sound of miscellaneous preparations grew louder, and Jefferies watched the man's expression. He would probably put the right interpretation on what he had just been told, substituting *psych center for hospital*. By the end of the week, many of those 627 people would have put essentially the same label on his unspeaking, docile son. They would all draw the same inevitable conclusion made easy by one, uncomplicated fact. It would be true.

There was a small cheer from the other replacements as the forward hatch slid back and out of view. A strong breeze filled the cabin with the odd but not unpleasant odors of the new world.

"About time," said the corporal. He gathered his improvised squad and herded them down the mobile gantry. "You coming now, sir?" he asked from the doorway.

Jefferies' initial reaction was to wait until the flight deck was completely empty before he tried to move Steven. Still, perhaps it would be better if the corporal saw this, too. He had to keep reminding himself that moments like this would help confirm things later.

He leaned over his son, removing the harness restraints. "Steven, it is time to go." He gave the boy a leading tug on the arm. Still he remained motionless.

"Do you need any help there, sir?" The corporal had a clear view of everything that was happening.

"No, thank you. I can manage." Jefferies placed his hand upon the boy's chin and pulled the face up to establish eye contact. "Steven, it's time to go now."

The face stared back at him without recognition. It was the far

end of the cycle, total isolation from his surroundings. A stranger again; the cold, emotionless persona that periodically inhabited the familiar features of his child, twisting them into the mask.

"Sir, the carrier's waiting," the corporal's voice called from the doorway again.

Jefferies placed both of his wrists underneath the arms of the boy and lifted him to a standing position, where he remained. He took a moment to straighten the child's clothing, then placed his arm firmly around the boy's shoulders. Together, almost in step, they moved out the doorway and down the gantry, towards the ground.

As they passed the corporal, a quote from an ancient writer came to the Commissioner's mind. In the past, it had been a favorite, but now he did not care for its reeking cynicism, here in this place of his own choosing.

"All the world's a stage . . ."

A sergeant stood waiting as the personnel carrier pulled up to the administration building. With bored efficiency, he quickly dispatched the others to quarters. The swarthy corporal threw a wave to Jefferies as he marched off in the direction of the barracks.

For the first time, the sergeant turned his attention to the father and son.

"Commissioner Jefferies," he said, "my name's Allstat. I'll be your liaison for the duration of your stay here at Mau Ty. General Eddleson sends his compliments, sir, and regrets that he is unable to meet you in person."

For the first time in a long while, Jefferies almost laughed out loud.

"I quite understand, sergeant. I'm well aware of the complexities of Corps life. Especially at a post like this one."

That should make things clear to the old man. Jefferies knew that the entire conversation would be repeated to the CO verbatim later. The sarcasm wouldn't be lost on a man like Eddleson. For him, Mau Ty was a career dead end. Let him know that Jefferies knew enough about Corps bureaucracy to be aware of it as well.

Sergeant Allstat led them off in the direction of a series of low, one-story buildings. They were typical personnel quarters; Jefferies recognized the plastiform style. Probably the entire complex had been set in a single day as the teams had moved from one prefab skeleton to the next, filling the almost invisible but infinitely resilient bladders with foam. Typical of the Corps approach.

Simple. Efficient. They could be very good, when they bothered to try.

Inside the barracks, the sergeant led them to a standard officer's room.

"Is there anything I can get for either you or your son?" Allstat put heavy emphasis upon the last word as the boy followed his father into the small chamber, then stopped in the middle of the room.

"Yes, we'll need a small flyer soon," Jefferies surveyed the room as he spoke. "Make sure to see me in the morning about that."

The sergeant pulled a small recorder from his pocket. "Anything else, sir?"

"I would like to meet with the general as soon as possible."

"That has already been taken care of, sir. 0800 hours in the morning, local adjusted. Not shipboard."

Jefferies saw an opportunity. "Not good enough, sergeant." He used the tone he reserved for pompous officials who needed a good dose of humiliation. Actually, the time fit standard protocol for a CO on his own base, but it was time to start pushing. Jefferies could see that it was necessary if he was going to keep Eddleson squirming and resentful.

"You go back and tell the general that he will meet with me tonight." Jefferies peered about for a clock and spotted one embedded in the wall above the room's doorway. "Suggest to *him* that 1800 hours, shipboard time, would be convenient. Also have our luggage here in the next ten minutes."

The sergeant recognized the tone of dismissal. Eight minutes after he left, the luggage arrived.

The two sullen privates constructed a small mountain out of the bags they lugged into the room. Neither spoke, working as slowly and methodically as possible to stretch the job to its limit. For a while, they simply stepped around the motionless figure of the boy who continued to stand in the same spot where he had entered the room. Eventually, one of the soldiers stopped in mid-stride and glared at Jefferies. He moved the boy to the empty bunk, letting him lie down. Within moments, Steven was asleep.

After the privates departed, Jefferies sat down at the small desk in the corner. He withdrew the crumpled piece of paper, the bright magenta bond of the communications bridge of a starship. After two weeks, it was falling apart in his hands.

HAVE JUST BEEN INFORMED OF YOUR DESTINATION. PROTEST IN THE STRONGEST TERMS. PROGNOSIS NOT DEFINITIVE. EXTENDED TREATMENT MAY YIELD RESULTS. THIS ACTION UNCONSCIONABLE.

YOU HAVE TWISTED MY SPECULATIONS TO SUIT YOUR OWN NEEDS. THIS IS NOT A VIABLE SOLUTION. RECONSIDER. I WILL NOT CONDONE THIS, REGARDLESS OF RESULTS.

BRANT

To hell with Brant. This has got to work. The thought didn't leave any room for internal debate as Jefferies rose and began to sort the luggage into two piles, one personal and the other camping equipment.

Hell of a time for him to get cold feet about it. Why did he even mention it if he hadn't wanted Jefferies to seriously consider it. Nobody asked him to go through the data and speculate about the possibilities of Mau Ty. He did that on his own. Let him live with it. He won't say a thing about it to anyone, in any case. Afraid to implicate himself. The thin-skinned idiot of a psychologist.

For the first time, Jefferies realized that he didn't like Brant. He had been Mora's friend, part of the crowd she had known before they had met. A young, energetic crowd, completely myopic about anything except whatever particular branch of the sciences they might be interested in. Barely tolerant of a middle-aged power merchant, their tag for him when their newly wedded friend was out of earshot. But they hadn't been so careful as far as what Jefferies himself might overhear.

So why had he taken the boy to Brant after Balter? He supposed it was a sense of guilt, displacement more than likely. Blame yourself for what happened to her, so you go to her friend for help. It was a crazy kind of logic he had seen others use when grief and recriminations got mixed together in equally self-destructive parts.

Besides, Brant was as good as anybody else. The boy had to see somebody and Brant was available, hell, falling over himself to be solicitous for *Mora's son*. He had done as well as anybody could have, better probably, because he was brilliant and innovative. He just didn't have the courage to stay with it. To hell with his hesitations.

Liar, he could hear Mora's voice, *you're just as scared as he is*.

Of course I am. But that doesn't change things. It's got to be done, that's all.

Disgust would have been all over her face.

So it's as simple as that again. You don't really give a damn what happens to him.

Not true, he protested to the specter.

Like it wasn't true about me. That's what you always kept saying. You really did give a damn; it was just the job. Understand, dear.

Live with it. Spend days waiting for you to remember where you happened to have dropped the family.

You knew how it was. There was no way for you not to have known.

Mora's face bitter now. *Knowing isn't living. And we didn't do much of that toward the end. Not you, not me, not even Steven.*

I know, what else was there to say? He pleaded with the ghost inside his head. Just let it go, please?

Balter was even part of it. You couldn't even squeeze enough time for that. Not even then.

"Leave it!" His voice strangled the words into the empty room. Steven stirred in his sleep but did not awaken. "Just leave it," he repeated to the dimming image.

Too many ghosts, shadows. But she was right about them; he'd have to make his own peace with that some other day. But not now. Steven was now. This stranger that was his son, barely a part of his life for the last decade. His mother's child until Balter, now with a father who wondered where it was going to end. Desperation is the mother of flimsy hope. Certainly a motto for the present situation, he decided.

By the time he had finished sorting out the piles of camping equipment and the clothing necessary to give a plausible explanation to the next few days, it was almost time for the meeting. Jefferies noticed with a certain feeling of thanks that the boy was still asleep. Now the face was one he knew, the child of that earlier time. The face that resembled Mora so much.

A series of staccato raps on the door brought him back.

"The general is waiting, sir." There was an aura of rigid obedience in Allstat's stance.

"Fine," Jefferies replied, and they left the room. Outside a small motorized carrier stood waiting for them. It came with a driver.

"I took the liberty of signing a MAC out for you, sir. The driver is also at your disposal," Allstat commented as they climbed into the vehicle. "Everything is within walking distance, but I thought it might be easier for you to find your way about with a guide."

"Quite unnecessary, sergeant, but I appreciate the gesture." A man who plays all the angles, Jefferies thought as they pulled out. When in doubt, keep everybody happy.

The command post was situated in the exact center of the hexagonal base. The six wings of buildings radiated from the command center as spokes from the hub. Jefferies knew enough about the Corps's basic layout to realize that each represented a separate area of usage under vague labels: Maintenance, Research, Com-

munications. The arm that they were now riding parallel to was the Personnel section. It only took them a few minutes to cover the mile length.

Oddly, Eddleson's office was not where Jefferies had expected it. The sergeant led him not to the large, second-story glass enclosure atop the central hub that was traditionally reserved for the base commander. Instead they worked their way into the lower, central office area beneath it. In front of an unadorned door they stopped, and the sergeant knocked.

"Come in," a strong, unintimidated voice called to them.

It was a spartan room. Other than a single communications console, there seemed to be no other furniture in the room, which was just as well. The piece of equipment was designed to be the work area and desk in a room at least three times the size of the one in which it presently sat. Jefferies wondered how they even managed to get it in.

But it wasn't just the lack of furniture. Jefferies was used to finding a CO's office walls littered with mementos. Here there was not a single plaque, engraving, or award. It was bare, utilitarian, unwieldy in its functional drabness.

Matches the man, that was apparent as Eddleson rose from the single console chair and moved to meet Jefferies.

"Commissioner." It was almost a single-syllable word when it came from his mouth. Straight, inflexible as the cavernous furrows on the officer's forehead.

"General Eddleson, a pleasure to meet you. I'm glad you could take the time to see me."

Jefferies caught the hard line of the eyes, almost an angry flinch at his statement.

"Sergeant," the general called out to the hallway, "that will be all." The door closed.

"Commissioner," the tone was bellicose, "I hadn't really expected you tonight." The general faced Jefferies. "Frankly, I hadn't really expected you at all. So let me ask you a question. What the hell are you doing here?"

When in doubt, attack. Eddleson was typically military, so Jefferies responded with a feint.

"Do you happen to have a chair anywhere about?" he asked affably.

Without another word the general turned and slipped behind the desk. There Jefferies discovered a second seating area built into the console next to the command chair.

"You haven't answered my question," Eddleson pressed.

"You're quite right, General. I haven't."

"Commissioner, let me be blunt. I don't care for the RRC. I don't trust it. You damn people don't know what the hell you want from us. I've spent a good portion of my career trying to develop planetary resources around a set of rules and regulations that push us constantly to produce but never give us a free hand. I'm tired of civilians swooping down on a base, nitpicking a collection of violations, then getting some commander kicked back to an Academy training assignment because he tried to do his job."

"You don't seem bothered too much by the fact that I'm one of those 'civilians' that does the kicking." Jefferies was impressed. There was more to Eddleson than what he had read in the service file.

"How do you think I ended up at Mau Ty?" The general leaned forward. "You and I both know that this is a final assignment. I'm a year and a half away from retirement. This is it for me. After the report the last commissioner turned in on me, I was lucky to get this."

"All right, General Eddleson. You've made yourself clear. You don't like me or the commission. So what is all of this? You received a memo from my office. This is a personal matter. There's nothing really official about this stop."

Eddleson stood up. "Commissioner, do you really think I believe that? *A camping trip? Here?* This is a military reservation. We're still at least twenty-five years from the first wave of civilian development. Hell, the biological survey won't be completed and filed for at least a year. You're taking a risk just sitting here breathing. And you show up to go camping?"

"Consider it a personal eccentricity." Jefferies followed the other man's movements around the room. He wanted particularly to see what the physical reaction would be to his last comment.

It was simple. Eddleson laughed.

"Commissioner," he continued, "you people with the RRC don't have personal lives. It's business with you every hour of the day. Besides, while you may be power-hungry bastards, you didn't get to where you are by being eccentric. Though I will admit you've made a good attempt. The boy's nice window dressing. An actor, I assume, although it doesn't take much talent to play a psychotic. What's it supposed to be? Regression, catatonia?"

"Severe depression," Jefferies answered, but the affability was gone from his voice. "And that boy, window-dressing considerations aside, does happen to be my son." A look of incredulity came over Eddleson's face. Jefferies continued.

"You asked me what the hell I was doing on Mau Ty? To put it simply, General, trying to help my son. Yes, there is a minor 'official' matter involved, but the primary reason is as simple as that."

"What's the problem?" Suspicion still edged the general's voice.

"He's been in treatment approximately two years, General. He went through a very traumatic experience on a camping trip. Since then he's grown progressively more depressed and withdrawn."

"What happened?"

Jefferies hesitated before he answered. "His mother died while they were vacationing on Balter's Landfall. Flyer crash in a remote area. By the time they were overdue and rescue teams sent out, she was dead. Steven was with her the entire time."

"Where were you?"

" 'Nitpicking' for violations, as you put it. I couldn't make it."

For a moment Eddleson paused, taken back by what Jefferies had just said. Still the suspicion lingered, as well as the hostility.

"I'm sorry about that, Mr. Jefferies," the general finally commented, "but I still don't buy any of this. There's no point. Why bring him here, of all places?"

Jefferies saw that the man had given him the necessary opening. "A number of reasons, General. The fact that the doctors suggested that there's a small chance he might react, have a breakthrough, if he were exposed to the same conditions that existed at the time of his mother's death. The fact that this is the first opportunity I've had to be with my son, alone, for two years. The fact that I've got to make a decision about the possibility of confining him permanently to a treatment center, and I really don't know what he's like except through the doctors' eyes. It seems to me that those are all sufficient reasons."

"You could have done all that back on Balter."

"Yes," Jefferies conceded, "but not without publicity." He probed the face of the man across from him. He's still not convinced, he decided. That's good.

"General, you obviously are aware of my situation. There are eight of us. We control most of the appropriations for the Corps and therefore for a large portion of the private sector that supplies it. We're scrutinized by the press constantly. As you put it before, our job is to make trouble, shake things up. That doesn't make us popular. Not with the military. Not with the general public.

"Though you may not be sympathetic, it's difficult, unpleasant work for each of us. I have no intention of making it any more

difficult for the others or myself by having my personal problems sifted through the media so that some enterprising commentator can somehow blame the entire situation on the Resources Regulatory Commission. There's been enough embarrassment already."

"Commissioner, that's all a little too convenient, but let's say for the moment that I accept it. That explains why you picked Mau Ty, but what's the official line? You mentioned a 'minor' matter. What's that?"

Jefferies responded quickly, hoping that there would be no suggestion of the stress that had suddenly welled up inside of him.

"Allstat has already made arrangements for a flyer. I also need a briefing from your staff on what your people have been referring to as the Lesser Northern Plateau . . ."

A puzzled look clouded the officer's face.

"There's nothing but some low-grade mineral deposits and a lot of local herbivores: wingers, creep strips, some water boars."

"And the shapers."

Eddleson leaned back into his chair, a wide grin spreading across his face.

"Commissioner, this is ridiculous. You might have convinced me that the boy's the real reason you're here, but the *shapers*? That's not even plausible as a flimsy cover. It wouldn't fool a moron, much less the press."

"Nevertheless, General Eddleson, they are the 'official' business. They've generated a great deal of interest, both in the scientific community and the commercial sector. I'm here to check them out personally."

The general was having a difficult time preventing out and out laughter.

"Commissioner, I don't know what reports you people have been reading, but they're not from my staff. Hell, they're not even sure that they've identified the correct organism, much less have any firm idea of what's going on in that relationship. And about the only thing we are sure of is that there's no application to humans."

"That doesn't change my intention to see them for myself," Jefferies answered dryly.

Several minutes passed without words. Eddleson rose from his chair and crossed the room to a wall recess. He poured himself a large cup of some ersatz concoction that resembled coffee. He waved the pitcher in Jefferies' direction, received a short, negative tilt of the head, then sipped from the cup for a few moments.

"All right, Commissioner," he abruptly spoke. "Whatever you want, you've got. There's not much I can do about it, anyway."

The capitulation was total. For a moment, Jefferies wondered if he had miscalculated the man. He hoped not. He was counting on his belligerence, the basic distrust of a Corps officer for the Commission and anything related to it.

"But there's one thing I want you to know," Eddleson continued. "I still recognize that this is all a smoke screen. You've got more going on here than you are telling, but that's typical Commission style. Fine, you go off into the Plateau, if that's what you want. I'll make sure that you have all the support personnel you want."

"That won't be necessary, General." Jefferies watched the momentary confusion. "I'm an experienced camper. There are no carnivores. You said so yourself. All I want is a good briefing on the area and a flyer. It will be just Steven and me going in."

Eddleson started to make a comment, then stopped himself, as if he had come to a sudden realization. When he did speak, the tone left no doubt.

"You know that if you do that, I'm totally absolved of any responsibility in case anything happens. That applies to both of you."

He's getting there. Jefferies could see the conclusion beginning to form in the mind of the soldier.

"I understand that perfectly, General."

"In fact I'm required by regulations not to incur any expense in attempting to aid you in case of emergency if you fail to accept Corps personnel. That's supposed to be for your own protection." The general's face twisted, as the man tried to keep emotions from crossing his features.

"I'm aware of your requirements, General. The RRC approved the ruling when it was drafted."

"That applies to the boy as well, you know."

"Yes, I know."

Eddleson dropped into a silent meditation of the man across from him.

"And of course you'll sign a release for yourself."

"Certainly." Jefferies was almost sure that the man knew.

"And as the boy's guardian, you're empowered to sign it for him as well."

Almost, thought Jefferies. To the officer he answered, "I certainly will sign whatever forms you like, for both of us."

Eddleson reached across the desk to the intercom.

"Tie in Sergeant Allstat for me, please," he spoke quietly into the device. After a few seconds the noncom's voice replied.

"Sergeant, arrange for a briefing on the Lesser Northern Plateau by Furlong. Make it at the commissioner's convenience. He's already mentioned the flyer to you. Arrange a checkout as well and have the vehicle signed out to him. Anything else he asks for, give him. Report back here immediately."

Eddleson returned his gaze to the commissioner. It was a while before he spoke.

"I'll have the forms brought to your quarters before you leave for the briefing in the morning." There was no attempt to hide the revulsion in the man's voice. "Is there anything else you want?"

"No, that should take care of it," Jefferies replied as both men rose to their feet. The officer did not extend his hand. Jefferies turned and started for the door.

"Commissioner." The general had returned to his desk. Jefferies wondered how the officer would communicate it, what the phrase would be.

"You don't particularly enjoy being embarrassed, do you?" the general asked.

"Does anyone, General?"

"One other thing, Commissioner."

"Yes?"

"How long do you think a boy in your son's condition would last? I mean on his own, out there?"

"That's a rather odd question, General."

"Is it?" the officer quietly answered. "I suppose it depends upon your point of view." There was a long pause. Thick, red knots bulged through the man's neck. "You people really think you can get away with it all," he finally continued, his voice almost choking with anger. "Understand this. I can't stop you from going, and if anything should happen, anything to *either* one of you, I'll follow the regulations down to the last letter. But I'll balance things, one way or the other after it's over. I won't let it be said that I let that kind of thing happen on my command."

Jefferies smiled at the officer.

"General, I have no idea what you are talking about. In any case, I believe we've settled our business for now. Thank you for your cooperation."

As he closed the door behind him, Jefferies thought he heard the officer mutter a curse. Later, as the evening wind rose to sweep across his face on the return trip to the barracks, Jefferies

was once again reminded of a basic rule of human nature that had served him well most of his adult life.

The best deceptions were always founded on the same basic element, one which was often the last thing perceived: the truth.

The fire made a feeble effort to look enticing, hedging back the moonless night with a lackluster glow. Jefferies tossed more of the thick reeds that passed for prairie grass on Mau Ty into its dull red core, and a few spikes of flame arose. It was poor fuel, but they had found nothing better. The Corps-issued stove still lay untouched in the storage compartment of the flyer. It would have made sense to use it, but tonight he had wanted a true fire, something to beat back his depression, a faint symbol of a rising hope. The pitiful sight in front of him had the opposite effect.

Three days, he thought, and still nothing. He tried not to worry but it was futile. He had to worry. Nothing was going right.

Furlong had said they'd be here. Where the hell were they?

"The Northern Plateau would appear to be the area of greatest concentration."

Furlong was a lower-grade officer who was really not an officer at all. He was a scientist in military dress, totally oblivious to rank, his or anyone else's. Jefferies could see the hint of brilliance behind the distracted look.

"Of course, that's an assumption on our part. We have seen more reported cases of shaper dissipation there than anywhere else. Since we can verify their existence only negatively and by limited direct observation, that's as definitive as we can get."

Jefferies knew all of this, but still forced himself to project the proper amount of interest. As the briefing continued, he verified what he was already aware of, and prayed for a few meager revelations that would confirm his hopes.

Furlong obviously enjoyed this chance to play the role of expert. Jefferies gave him room to expound as much as he liked.

"How did anyone ever come to suspect the shapers' existence?" he asked, although he knew the answer.

"We began to notice certain behavioral anomalies among the samples of the species we call the boars. Normally there is a winged scavenger that establishes a symbiotic relationship with each boar. It's analogous to the shark-scavenger fish on Earth.

"The odd thing about it is that the wingbats, that's our name for the scavengers, establish only one tie with a single boar during their lifetime. We noticed that they followed us back into the

compounds when we would bring in sample carcasses. Within a matter of days, the wingbats would die."

"I don't see how that led to the shapers," Jefferies interrupted. Furlong was warming to his subject, and the Commissioner did not want to dampen his energy.

"Well, actually it was rather inductive. We found a set of circumstances that suggested a generalization that implied something like the shapers.

"First, not every boar we brought in seemed to have an insistent wingbat buzzing around it. As a matter of fact, when we checked with the teams that brought in those particular samples, there seemed to be no indication of any scavenger activity after the moment of death. Secondly, each of those non-wingbat samples was in perfect health. It hadn't taken us very long to note the signs of disease in the species, but the non-wingbat group never contained any. That's when we sent out the camera crews."

"Those shots are amazing," Jefferies said. "They've caused quite a stir on Earth after they were leaked to the press."

Furlong shook his head. "That was an incredible mistake. The worst possible thing that could have happened."

But necessary, thought Jefferies. Once Brant had reached his tentative conclusions, there had to be a reason for the trip to Mau Ty. Jefferies took some small amount of pride in the fact that he had gotten the film out without any direct association to himself.

"You don't feel that there's any real application?" Jefferies asked.

"Commissioner, those films show a dramatic situation that may have fired people's imaginations. But they don't give the true picture. So a few wingbats disappear. So what? The shaper organism is apparently on the order of a bacterium. It has not been identified in its monocellular form, and I doubt that it will be in less than a hundred years." The biologist became animated, almost livid. "Look, we're not even sure what we're searching for. All we know is that when a shaper wingbat forms a relationship, we end up with a boar that never grazes and seems to stay in perfect health with no signs of aging. Sure, it looks great. Complete transfer of energy to the host—no starvation, no sickness; hell, probably no death.

"But nobody stops to consider the obstacles. The only way we've been able to look at the organism is in its multicellular form, and physically that's the same as a normal wingbat. If we try to do anything more than simple observation, the form disassociates.

There's no way to even get near an individual cell through dissection.

"Maybe one of these days we'll sort it out from every other monocellular form of life on this ball. Stumble onto it through sheer dumb luck. But that's a hell of a long time in the future with more trial and error experimentation than I ever want to think about."

"But you've had other experiments. I've seen the report."

"You mean Hillenbrand?" Furlong began rubbing the bridge of his nose in weary exasperation. "That was a totally uncontrolled situation, hardly scientific method at its best."

"Still he did accomplish something, you have to admit that."

"Doug Hillenbrand managed, with extreme concentration, to organize the shaper organism into a multicellular construct. That's true. But he couldn't retain the organization for more than five minutes, absolute maximum."

"But he did create reproductions of people here on the base?"

"Yes, but only if they were present and he could see them."

"Then there is evidence of a human application for the shapers?"

Furlong's answer was filled with agitation. "Not at all. No one else could accomplish the trick, for one thing. It was obvious that Hillenbrand had a unique faculty, probably genetic. And even with that, what good would it do to those who might have the same ability? Five minutes of an object, a being who has to be present anyway. It's a parlor trick."

"So what's the current theory on what we've got here?" Jefferies inquired after a moment.

Furlong leaned forward. "For what it's worth, we think the symbiotic organization is dependent upon the creature's ability to discern the reality of the image. What I mean is that with the boars, the shaper scavenger and the actual wingbat are essentially the same. The animal could not care less which is which. They both perform the same function, as far as the boar's ability to discern that function. Do you know that the boars have scored lower on the Dues Intelligence tests than any other native species we've tested? I personally see that as tremendously significant."

"Are you saying that the boars are too stupid to know that the shapers are not the real thing?"

"Not at all. What I'm getting at is the inherent perception of reality. There are other symbiotic relationships on this planet. A much higher percentage than we usually find, as a matter of fact. But only the boars are actively involved with the shapers. Why? It's apparent that the multicellular arrangement of the

shapers has to be dependent upon the host organism. It supplies the force, the organizing pattern by providing the image that the shapers mimic.

"But only the boars are low enough on the intelligence scale to fail to recognize the difference between the shaper and the actual wingbat. For them reality is simply a matter of function. Since the shaper organism functions as a scavenger, it is a scavenger as far as the boar is concerned."

"Then it's a matter of belief."

"Exactly."

"How do you account for Hillenbrand?"

"He had the level of imagination necessary to accept, even for a short period of time, the image as a dual reality. He was able to suspend his perception of reality, or widen it, if you prefer, to accept the shaper image as a real form.

"But he couldn't sustain it. No human being can, I suspect. Underneath all of the self-hypnosis that someone like Hillenbrand might be able to generate is going to be the knowledge that it is unreal, an image, an entity created by the imagination. Once that realization forces itself to the forefront of consciousness, then the organizational pattern falls apart. I know it is false, therefore my mind cannot provide an acceptance that allows the creation of the image."

Everything was the same as it had appeared in the reports that Jefferies had read. Nothing new. Even Brant agreed with Furlong, to some extent. Three days now had convinced him that they were both correct. The more he considered the question, the more he was sure of it. There would never be a practical long-term application to the shapers phenomenon. But whatever the outcome, they had served their purpose up to this point. There was only one step left now that needed their participation.

One more day, Jefferies decided, I'll give it one more day. Until sunset tomorrow.

A small moan went up into the air. Jefferies walked over to his son's sleeping bag. The boy lay still at that moment, with only faint sounds escaping from his lips. Unlike the previous nights back at the base, Steven did not resemble anyone now except himself. Not even about the eyes was there a resemblance to Mora.

Jefferies found himself trembling. All the fears came to mind again, but enlarged and expanded. For an instant he considered. I can still stop this. In the morning we can take the flyer back

to the base. I haven't done anything that can't be explained away, hasn't already been explained and accepted. It can end right now.

He stared down at the sleeping face of his son as the thoughts came to him. Then, without apparent reason, the eyes flew open and stared back at Jefferies. In them Jefferies saw neither hope nor expectation, only passive, blind acceptance before the eyelids dropped down. There was no Mora there, no Steven, not even the stranger of the boy's waking moments. There was nothing that his father knew.

With a vicious swipe of his boot, Jefferies scattered the sickly embers of the fire, and crept off into a vague, nightmarish sleep.

It was close to sundown the next day when he spotted the boars from the air. He put over a mile between the herd and the flyer before he set it down, then walked back to within a hundred yards of the docile grazers.

Dozens of the animals were spread across the open field of prairie grass that ran continuously down to a wide, shallow river. Cautiously he walked into their midst.

He was a little surprised by their lack of reaction to his presence, even though Furlong had assured him that they tended to ignore the unfamiliar shape of humans. He stepped to within a few inches of one of the boars. The dark, sweaty hide gleamed in the light. Resting on the thick bulge of the animal's shoulder was a wingbat.

It turned to stare back at him. The thick, copper feathers seemed almost terrestrial, as did the green, irisless eyes. He wanted to reach out and touch it, to assure himself that it was real. He glanced about the field, wondering how many shapers were there. A dozen? Four? None at all?

For twenty minutes he wandered among them, to make sure that they were totally oblivious to him, then he went back to the flyer. It was over an hour before he returned with a noiseless sonic rifle and his son. He walked the boy to the center of the herd.

"Steven," he said once the boy was settled in a quiet, seated position. "You stay here." Jefferies looked about the plain once more. It did look a little like Balter's Landfall. Maybe the boy really thought he was there again. Perhaps he truly believed. Brant thought it might work. There were so many doubts in all of this, though.

Not for much longer, Jefferies realized with a dispassion that frightened him. It will all be over, one way or the other. It ends here.

He leaned down, looking into his son's face.

"Just stay right here. She's coming." The boy's face gained a spark of anticipation. "Just stay very still."

Jefferies unslung the rifle and marched away from the child, putting a few dozen yards between himself and his son. Then he opened fire with the weapon.

The first three boars fell to the ground without any kind of a sound, and their scavengers began a frantic diving and circling about the carcasses. It wasn't until the fourth that the small aviary on the dying animal's back dissipated like a mist in a light breeze.

He looked towards his son. Nothing had changed. The boy still sat patiently, waiting for a sign.

Jefferies continued shooting. He counted six shaper boars sprawled bleeding on the ground before he sensed the change.

It was like thin smoke wavering in front of the boy. Jefferies opened fire again, dropping ten more boars, four of which turned out to have shapers. He could see the smoky form now shift, taking on solidity. His son rose, extending a hand toward the cloudy figure.

Jefferies continued shooting. Each disappearing scavenger was followed by an added detail to the shape, and by an increased animation on the part of the boy.

He brought the weapon away from his shoulder when the shape reached forward and took the boy's hand. It wasn't Mora exactly, he thought as he watched the two, the boy and the shaper, embrace. All the passion was gone. Here was only the devotion, the affection. In the eye of the beholder, Jefferies thought.

The pair started to move away from the herd, heading in the direction of the distant hills. She always preferred the mountains, he remembered. That's where they had been headed on Balter.

"Mora," he called, but she did not answer. He wanted to ask—would they be all right, had he done the right thing—but there was no response from the slowly retreating pair.

If Brant was right to this point, he's probably right about the rest. The thought didn't comfort him the way he had imagined it would. Still the symbiosis seemed complete. There would be the perfect health, the guarantee of survival in the mutual needs of each.

For a brief instant the coming scandal, the one of his own creation, flared into realization.

Let them say what they want. I can live with it. Infanticide. Like Quisling. The name forever associated with the act. It would

be the finest deception of his career, the pyre on which everything he was would go up in flames. Security in lies; mendacity in truth—the classic formula. It would work this time, too.

The two figures were barely visible as they followed the course of the river, making their way to its eventual highland source. Jefferies watched until he could no longer make them out. By then, it was almost night. ●



"Hey, this thing is really in there good, huh?"



art: Odbert

SPACE OPERA FOR (PURISTS) (MODERNISTS)

by Neal Starkman

The author, currently a resident of Seattle, Washington, holds a Ph.D in Social Psychology, but instead, chose to work for a "contraceptive boutique." (That's what he says, really!)

This is his first sale.

"The problem is really quite simple," said Professor Melchior grimly. "Without the Lazarus isotope, we are completely susceptible to the deadly virus now being sprayed about the Earth by Koron, that rat. The isotope can be produced only by bombarding with neutrons the (salivary) (seminal) secretions of the pangolin, a rare creature of the wilds of Pakistan. Unfortunately, Koron

has set up camp just outside Karachi and is systematically disposing of all the pangolins the Koroni can find. We need one gram of pangolin (saliva) (sperm) to save the world. Without it we're doomed, all of us doomed."

Professor Melchior wrung (his) (her) hands in a rare display of emotion. (His) (Her) beautiful (daughter) (son) Dawn massaged (his) (her) neck and looked tearfully up at Commander Lance Buckles, (standing erect) (erect) in the doorway.

"Can you help us, Commander? You're our only hope now. Who knows when any of us will catch the virus? Excuse me." The (blonde) (blond), lithe, supple, virginal (girl) (boy) coughed for half a minute into (her) (his) handkerchief. Even from a distance, Buckles' keen steel-gray eyes noted the handkerchief was red when it came away from (her) (his) mouth.

"I'll do my best, (Miss) (Mr.) Melchior," he promised. "But call me Lance." He smiled at (her) (him), confidence radiating from strong, (white) (capped) teeth. The (girl) (boy) gazed adoringly. "All right—(Lance) (I can imagine why they call you 'Lance'). And you can call me Dawn."

Buckles tried to smile again as Dawn suddenly coughed up more blood, this time over (her) (his) chin and shirt. "I'll be back," Buckles vowed, "with the pangolin (spit) (semen), now that I've got something to come back for. Fear not, fair Dawn; I won't let you down. Keep a fire burning, and trust in me. Look to the East, and chomp at the bit."

"(God speed) (Will you get your rear in gear)," yelled the Professor, as Buckles strode out.

"Good luck," choked Dawn.

Commander Lance Buckles studied (photographs) (holographs) of the pangolin as his trusty sidekick (Willie Joe Satchmo) (Joe Little Feather) piloted the (stratocruiser) (D-11CY9) on a course over the Arctic (wastes) (waste dumps), past the Soviet Union, and toward Pakistan.

The pangolin was an odd-looking creature, resembling an armadillo. It was covered nose to tail by large triangular scales, used as defensive armor. When frightened, it curled itself into a spiral, but its sharp claws could flay the skin off a man's arm in seconds. Buckles hoped that any pangolin he found would be friendly enough to (salivate) (ejaculate) for him.

Some (four hours) (forty minutes) after takeoff, the vehicle honed in on a reasonably secure landing spot, and, under the expert guidance of (Willie Joe) (forty-seven separate computers),

fluttered down like a (duck on water) (silicon chip on toast), and landed amazingly quietly for such a cumbersome machine. Buckles prepared to leave the (cruiser) (CY9), and gave (Willie Joe) (Joe) his instructions.

"But, (Boss) (Chief), what if you run into trouble?"

"In that case," said Buckles solemnly, his hand resting on (Willie Joe's) (Joe's) burly (shoulder) (thigh), "there's a message I want you to deliver to a (lady) (boy) by the name of Dawn Melchior. Tell (her) (him)," he faltered, "tell (her) (him) I gave my life to that rat Koron while thinking of (her) (his) angelic face."

The dependable (Willie Joe) (Joe) nodded, taking down the message in (shorthand) (pictographs). "'... while thinking of (her) (his) angelic face.' Got it, (Boss) (Chief)."

And Buckles stifled a sniffle and left the ship.

By scrambling to the top of a hill, as he had been trained, Buckles could see the teeming city of Karachi in the valley beneath him. He touched the flask in his hip pocket for reassurance. He was determined to bring that flask back to the Professor, filled with pangolin (saliva) (sperm), or his name wasn't—

"Commander Lance Buckles. How nice to see you. Dropped in for a visit, have you?"

Buckles spun around, (flame-thrower) (phaser) in hand, but a contingent of Koroni had him covered with weapons of their own. And leading the contingent was his old nemesis, Koron.

"You rat," spoke Buckles defiantly, as he was trained.

Koron ignored the description. "Commander, please be so kind to dispose of your weapon." Buckles resignedly dropped it at his feet. Koron motioned to a comrade. ("*Plyk kroh goklykl!*") ("*Iskfray imhay!*")

Buckles grimaced as the Koroni lieutenant frisked his lean, muscular body for more weapons. These creatures were despicable, repugnant rats, rats the size of humans. He knew they came from another galaxy, plundering, destroying the very fabric of peace-loving planets, spreading their evil, exploiting resources, killing those who stood in their way, enslaving the rest, having their obnoxious way with captive (women) (beings), and generally (tearing down the energy, the pride, the society of the planet, till its inhabitants were a broken and shamed people) (giving off bad vibes).

Finally the frisker was done, sniffing and ferreting out any weapons Buckles had concealed. The American now stood in the

midst of his (flame-thrower, three automatic rifles, machete, magnetic poison-dart set, vials of black widow spiders, knife handle with five sets of retractable blades, rope, bolo, atomizer filled with hydrochloric acid, hydrolyzer filled with atomic acid, rusty pen-knife, and other weapons he had even forgotten he was carrying) (phaser and cartridges). Buckles noted with dismay that his flask had also been removed.

"I suppose you think we're going to kill you now," chattered Koron in his pidgin English, which mystifyingly was more proper than Buckles' own. The alien rubbed his forepaws together, and Buckles' steel gray eyes could see that there were pieces of cheese—Tilsit, he guessed—clinging to them. God, he was a slob.

"I'm afraid, however," continued Koron, "that no one will be taking any lives for the moment. We have other plans for you. (*Rhklisc!*)" (*Overmay assway!*)

And the Koroni marched Commander Buckles down the hill and into their hidden camp.

The camp was efficient, Buckles could see that. He admired the Koroni's discipline, despite his overpowering feeling that the entire camp was infested by stinking disease-ridden vermin. The stench of cheese was everywhere.

"I think we shall keep you here for a while," said Koron, as his henchrats unceremoniously tossed Buckles into a crude cage with stone walls and (wooden) (Formica) bars. "I'll return to converse with you. At the moment I must attend to a weekly Pillage Report." Buckles spit at the party as they left, taking care that their backs were turned before he did so.

Commander Lance Buckles examined the cage, as he was trained. The (wood) (Formica) was not strong, and he suspected that he might be able to break through, given enough time. Time! Time was what was in short supply. He pictured Dawn, lovely, willowy, winsome Dawn, coughing (her) (his) guts into an orchid handkerchief. He must escape!

Just then he heard a strange skittering sound. It came from behind his enclosure. Unfortunately, the back wall, being stone, was opaque, and he couldn't see what went on behind him. But that skittering—it was the unique sound of an angry pangolin! The Koroni must be keeping the pangolins caged until they killed them! The rats!

"Comfortable, I hope?" The condescending tone of King Rat, Koron, interrupted his thoughts.

"Ah, Commander, we're old enemies, are we not? How is Pro-

fessor Melchior, by the way? And (his) (her) lovely (daughter) (son)?"

"You leave (her) (him) out of this, you slimy rodent!" Buckles blurted, as he was specifically not trained.

The alien grinned. "You poor, (emotional) (unactualized) fool. Really, Commander, I should have expected more from you. I see that I will have to dispose of you quite soon. You are amusing but useless."

"What do you want with us, Koron?" Buckles demanded, reining in his anger. "What can you possibly hope to gain from Earth? What is your master plan?"

Koron deliberated a moment, rubbing his whiskers, crumbly with cheese—Gorgonzola, guessed Buckles. "It's fairly obvious, I should think. We want your cheese."

"Our cheese?" gasped Buckles. "You—you monster!"

"Yes, Commander, we're appropriating all your cheese, and destroying what we can't take with us. And we'll continue to monitor this planet to make sure that you don't produce any more. Just think," Koron smiled sadistically, "no more fettucini Alfredo, Commander Buckles. No more New York cheesecake. Say good-bye to grilled cheese sandwiches, cottage cheese salads, and cheese omelets."

"No! You can't!"

Koron continued maliciously. "Can't I, Commander? Remember what a cheeseburger tasted like? (Veal) (Protein) parmigiana? Welsh rabbits will go, of course. And, Commander, how do you like bagels and—butter?"

"No! It's horrible! Stop it!"

Koron chattered. "You'll have to do without wine and cheese, naturally, reuben sandwiches, nachos. You'll have to find some other topping for carrot cake. Then there's macaroni and—butter again? But, Commander, do you know what will be the worst to live without?"

"I don't want to hear it!" yelled Buckles, covering his muscular ears with his tanned, strong hands.

Koron mouthed something unintelligible so that Buckles thought he could remove his hands. Then Koron smiled and stared directly at him. "Commander," he said with gleeful evil, "I certainly hope you can get along without—(pizza) (quiche lorraine)!"

"No!" screamed Buckles, loud and long, and shook the bars of his cage violently, but to no avail. "You can't! No one could be that cruel! No one could be that inhuman!"

"My dear Commander, you forget. I am inhuman."

Buckles glared at the malevolent eyes of Koron. "Why are you so damned evil?"

Koron considered. "(It's something in me, some primeval, ancestral impulse which has held me in its sway ever since I was a little rat-baby. I am helpless to combat its powerful force. Sometimes—sometimes I wish someone would liberate me from its awful domination) (I like evil)," he said, and walked away.

Commander Lance Buckles had been dreaming of Cordon Bleu when he was woken by someone calling his name. He opened his eyes to see (Willie Joe Satchmo) (Joe Little Feather).

"(Willie Joe) (Joe)!"

"I've taken care of the guard rat with my (chlorophyll handkerchief) (phaser)," said (Willie Joe) (Joe). "Let's get you out of here."

They leaned against one of the (wood) (Formica) bars, pushing and pulling, till at last the bar gave way, and Buckles slithered out.

"Come on," urged Buckles' companion. "I know the way back to the ship. (She's) (It's) ready to go."

"No," said Buckles. "I haven't got the pangolin (spittle) (semen) yet. Did you bring a flask with you? The Koroni stole mine."

"I don't think so. I can check."

"Never mind, that'll take hours. We'll have to improvise. The pangolin cage is back here."

It was dusk, and the two men stealthily snuck up to the cage, identical to the one that held the Commander, except that this one contained an animal which had wound itself into a spiral, with its head at the core, protected by a coat of armor.

"This is it. I've got to get that (saliva) (semen). The fate of the world, and of the (woman) (man) I love, depends on it."

Buckles pulled the pangolin's tail through the (wooden) (Formica) bars, and it reared up and around and let out an infuriated screech.

"Hold it while I try to get the (saliva) (semen)," yelled Buckles, now that their cover was blown, and (Willie Joe) (Joe) grabbed the thrashing animal by its limbs, while Buckles dove for it.

"Have you got it yet?" shouted (Willie Joe) (Joe) presently. "I can't hold on much longer. It's really excited."

"Well, well, gentlemen, what have we here?" The unmistakably cultured but ratty voice of Koron pierced the darkness, and the two Americans quit the struggle and turned to face him, flanked by paw-soldiers.

"Commander, I congratulate you on your escape. I had not planned on entertaining your—how do you say—trusty sidekick as well."

Buckles stood riveted, close-mouthed and sullen. (Willie Joe's eyes) (Joe's feet) moved about frantically.

"I think you both should come with us now," said Koron.

They all paraded to the other end of the camp, and drew up by a large open warehouse. As they passed it, Buckles gawked at the vast quantities of cheese that lay in orderly stacks, cheeses of every description—Gruyeres, Munsters, Edams, pecorinos, Bries, Goudas, Stiltons, ricottas. A desperate idea came to him, and he veered off to one of the displays.

"Commander!" barked Koron, in response to an alarm from one of the soldiers. "Oh, I see, the last meal; your final taste of that delicious morsel. Very well, we shall wait. May I suggest the Roquefort; it's quite tangy yet smooth to the palate."

But Buckles, not replying, searched up and down the rows until he came to the cheese he was looking for. It was a wheel of Parmesan, and it appeared as if it weighed (ten pounds) (five kilos).

"Commander, I hate to rush you, but we really must be going. Executions are very unpleasant, but—ah, Parmesan. I prefer the provolone myself, but—how do you say—(*de gustibus non disputandum*) (I'm OK, you're OK)."

Buckles lugged the wheel of Parmesan over to the head rodent and made as if he were going to present the cheese to his captor.

"For me? Commander, I am touched. I—"

Buckles reared back and with a grunt and a mighty thrust slammed the Parmesan atop Koron's brow. There was a sickening crunch, as hard cheese met hard bone, and part of the Parmesan crumbled in Buckles' strong, tanned hands. But he noted with satisfaction that a greenish liquid was now spurting from the wide-eyed Koron. The rat gagged, spit more liquid, and toppled to the ground. The other Koroni watched aghast.

Even before Koron hit the ground, (Willie Joe) (Joe) and Buckles were off, out of the camp, plunging into darkness, and, helped immeasurably by the trusty (Willie Joe's fear) (Joe's tracking instincts), back to the (stratocruiser) (D-11CY9).

As soon as they were aloft, Buckles frantically gestured to his sidekick with his hands pointing to his mouth.

"Oh, right, (Boss) (Chief), I forgot," said (Willie Joe) (Joe), and produced a (paper) (styrofoam) cup from the ship's lavatory. Buckles grabbed the cup and expectorated. Then he collapsed.

When they had landed and been transported to the Professor's laboratory, Buckles finally began to relax. "Here's the pangolin sample," he said to the Professor, who seized it and started (his) (her) analysis. "You'll have to isolate it from my saliva, though. Couldn't be helped. I'll be back after debriefing." Buckles and (Willie Joe) (Joe) walked toward the exit, when Buckles stopped and looked back toward the Professor.

"You might be interested to know that Koron is dead."

"(Thank God) (Holo be praised)."

"Uh, where is Dawn, incidentally?" The Commander nonchalantly craned his neck about the lab.

"What?" The Professor seemed irritated. "Oh, I'm sorry, Lance, Dawn died some hours ago."

"Died?" (Willie Joe) (Joe) put out an arm to console his commander.

"Yes; I'm dreadfully sorry. A bloody mess (she) (he) was, too." The Professor returned to (his) (her) analysis.

"But, how—did (she) (he)—did (she) (he) suffer?"

The Professor looked up impatiently from (his) (her) work. "Yes, Lance, I'm afraid (she) (he) did suffer. Horribly. And (her) (his) last words were a message for you."

"A message?" And Buckles began to (tense) (weep). "What was the message?"

"(She) (He) said, 'What could be taking that (man) (boob) so long?' " ●

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THE SEA OF EVENING

by George Zebrowski


George Zebrowski is the author of *Macrolife* (Avon), and a non-fiction book on his work, *Perfecting Visions, Slaying Cynics*, edited by Jefferey M. Elliot, will be out from Borgo Press this year.

art: Dell Harris

"Men cannot make angels."

—Darwin

A week had passed since we began to suspect that the Sponge, as we called the Artificial Intelligence Matrix, had gone critical and was achieving self-awareness.

"Have some sympathy," I said as we strolled down the concrete path from the Brain Core Building toward the housing complex. The air was a bit chilly for late summer. A breeze hurried through the maple trees, as if ashamed of being early.

"It is sad about human beings," Ferguson replied as we turned into the setting sun. I shielded my eyes, but Henry looked straight ahead. "They're pressured from within," he said, "by impulses which don't seem to belong to them. Circumstances have rarely permitted much choice, until recent times. You find yourself alive, curious, too often appalled at what is in you and outside you. You balance, but the pincer action wears you down. What's it like for the Sponge, to be born into a black midnight? No sun or stars, only the intricate constellations of insensate knowledge."

The path turned back into the shade, and I took my hand away from my eyes.

"That's very nice," I said, "but I'm far from convinced that it has a localized ego. The Matrix is a simulator, a malleable uni-

verse of possibilities." I had admired Henry, looked up to him as a mentor, but his stylish misanthropy had begun to irritate me.

"For now. But elements within an enriched system may achieve individuality and continue developing. Our imaginations are also places where we simulate possibilities, yet we achieve a focused sense of self, however faceted. Even though it is a byproduct of complexity, consciousness plays a vital role. It's a complex feedback loop, contributing to self control and self-critical guidance. We grew into it from a more automatic state. If you doubt it, look at how we lose ourselves when we're absorbed in something, or dreaming. Self-awareness is as important to higher intelligence as pain."

"That's why bureaucracies are unconscious," I said. "They hate the pain of accurate feedback. Truth upsets the pecking order."

He gave a faint laugh. "Human beings are not yet what they might be."

I shrugged and we walked on in silence. I didn't feel like agreeing with him.

"An android psychologist," he continued suddenly, "might make a human patient feel that he's getting a more objective view of himself. The android brain would of course be lacking the rudimentary brain strata built up during evolutionary survival, so it would be a dispassionate observer in relation to us."

"Well," I said unsurely, "that sounds nice, but it's always been a matter of trying to climb out of our skins and looking back, human or other. You'll only set the regress back one step. We're all locked inside our skulls in the end."

"Objectivity is always relative, never objective, never an unconditional relationship."

I had the feeling that Ferguson was waiting for me to catch up with some notion of his own.

"What is it, Kevin?" he asked. "Bored?"

I stuck my hands shyly in my pockets and we walked on.

"The Brain Core is likely the first alien on earth," he said.

I imagined an android John the Baptist striding across the countryside.

"It might begin making doctorly observations about our failings," Ferguson said.

"Not if we raise it right."

"Reminds me of the fear human beings have of their children, that they won't be copies of the previous generation."

"What I meant is that it will be more like us than we realize, if it has to learn from us."

"Perhaps, but it will begin as a relatively free cortex."

I didn't answer.

"Consider your aliens," he went on, as if I had brought up the idea. "Now they might give us a chilling view of humanity."

"Some people have already given us that."

"The Core stands outside evolution's bloody building program. Egoless, free of the ruinous survival impulses emanating from lower mental structures, the Core is an unchained cortex."

No one can see the back of his own neck, and the barber cannot cut his own hair very well. I thought of the faint, hurrying galaxies, and imagined a great circle of civilizations linked in a chain of mutual examination, a vast configuration of observers facing the enigma of space-time, each getting a relative fix on the other.

"Even if alien civilizations exist," I said, "we'll probably never contact one. The universe is too vast, our moments of existence too brief to coincide."

We stopped and I looked at him in the red twilight. His unusually youthful face was blotched with shadows, making his lean shape appear menacing.

"Kevin," he said as he stepped closer and became again the co-researcher I knew, "don't you see?"

"What?"

"You do it all the time, so imagine why we haven't—"

"You can imagine anything."

The chill was getting to my shoulder. I waited in silence.

"Maybe they're waiting before they contact us," he said.

"You mean for us to grow up?"

"Yes, but it's important how."

"Oh, I see. You think the Core will help."

"It's an additional witness to the universe. It can corroborate or discredit our views of things . . . our best foot forward."

"You're hoping for too much," I said.

"I admit that the Core's objectivity will be only relative, but enough for a decent victory over the instinctive, unreflective mind. Better than we've had."

"It's still a long way to controlling wars, modifying politics, or even improving the chanciness of human personal relations." I was feeling contemptuous of him.

"In time," he said, "but consider this. 'Contact may occur only when other civilizations know that we have escaped the self-torment of our . . . let's say developmental stages. The creation of the Core intelligence might be the proof required.'"

"What?"

"I know it's ad hoc from your point of view. . . ."

I took a deep breath. "It's laughable, Henry! You assume a damned versus the elect theology. Only those who attain a virtuous state will be contacted from the skies."

He took out his already packed pipe and lighter in one motion, lit the tobacco and puffed up an angry cloud; for a moment the flame made his face seem grotesque. It was all over for him, I thought.

"How would they even know?" I asked, humoring him.

"They would keep informed."

"Pretty religious of you. Credits and demerits all go into a big book up there."

"Damn, this thing's gone out."

I looked up at the sky, newly swept clean by the unseasonably cold air pushing in from the north. If Henry had a breakdown, I would be promoted.

"You were always fairly orthodox, Kevin, even in your personal life. Never do anything if it means a risk or sacrifice."

"Fairly's the right word," I answered. "Why endanger past work without reasonable evidence?"

"Play the game until it fails." He relit his pipe with the dancing flame.

"Come on, Henry. You're abasing yourself before hypothetical superiors. Fine and good for speculations, but I'd hate to see this creeping into your work."

"Don't you look up to anyone? We search for fathers or sons among those we befriend . . . bits and pieces of what should have been fathers, or may have been sons, daughters . . ." He seemed very nervous about his pipe.

"Come on," I said finally, feeling a bit embarrassed by his question. "They would have to have observers to know." A horde of objections clamored for my attention.

"What if you can't see your game is failing?"

"Then you're swept away. It's a risk you have to take."

"Ah, there," he said, puffing his bowl into a glow.

It had grown dark, and we had not gone even halfway to the housing complex. I looked back to the now brightly lit dome of the Brain Core Building, where something newly aware was reaching out of its private darkness. A week now.

Stars appeared, brightening as twilight faded. Ferguson had made me feel the great outwardness; but the inner regions waited everywhere, vast and cavernous, inhabited by uncontrollable, fear-filled beasts, cruel and raging. Madness resonates in those

realms, crying with a brassy music. Even if we could travel to the suns of Orion, anywhere in the big black, the inner abyss would go with us. Could it be closed off? Should it be closed off? How many intelligent species had asked this question, made the effort, and failed?

Henry's wristphone beeped.

"Yes?"

"Are you alone?" a small voice asked.

"I'm with Doctor Flew."

"Security is ordering everyone indoors at once. Return to the Core Building."

"Yes, of course," Henry said, puffing with ease.

"Well, it's been intriguing," I said, raising my voice above the whisper of the wind in the trees. "Clever to think that we would be contacted as we transcend our old brains through the birth of artificial intelligences. But how can I buy it? Saviors from the stars, arriving to pat us on the head for having awakened our better self? It's a bit vague, you have to admit."

"Well, they wouldn't come just to reveal their presence, but . . . to deposit information in our developing Core, as a gift for the future. It would all be very discreet, I would imagine, nothing to cause culture shock."

I stared at his dark shape.

"Then, of course," he continued dryly, "the Brain Core would become an avenue of communication, a reliable intermediary between the species. The problem of communicating with actual alien individuals would be bypassed, thus avoiding embarrassing misunderstandings. Frequent contact between individuals would come later."

I suddenly knew what he would claim next.

"Yes, I'm with them," he said. "Humans have been taken from here routinely: raised, educated, and returned."

"Guardian angels . . ." I muttered. Henry had lost his mind. His phone began to beep, but he ignored it. He turned and his face caught the light from the Core Building. He gazed at me directly, in a way I had not known, without guile, it seemed; for the first time in my life I felt that I was looking into the mind of a genuinely free intelligence. He made me feel that I was the slow wit, the last to catch on that the darkness of human history was ending. I suppose most madmen have this capacity for imposing a vision. My future was assured, I realized.

"Henry," I said patiently, for friendship's sake. "It's not true. Don't you see, how can it—"

"Open your eyes," he said as my phone added its beep to his. My shoulder ached and the chill wind whispered painfully in my ears as I looked up.

Lights which were not stars began to appear in the sea of evening.

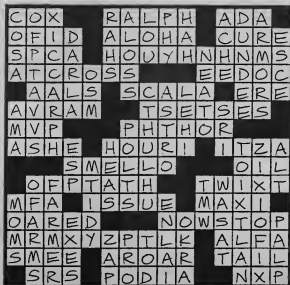
Henry's pipe clattered on the walkway, as if he had discarded it. He stood motionless.

"I hope to hell you know what you're doing," I said as the lights drew nearer. ●

Asfm Puzzle #12

From page 31

SOLUTION TO JAWBREAKERS



PETRIFIED

by Nina
Kiriki
Hoffman

art: Odbert

ODBERT

The author is 27,
a native
of Southern
California,
but a
resident
of Idaho.

She
presently
works as a
proofreader
on a
local
newspaper.

This is her
second sale.



Maybe if I watch it happen enough times, I can make it real inside me. Eyes meet eyes over the round red bowls of candles, hands meet hands between dirty ashtrays and glasses, intentions meet and match and bodies rise and leave together. I go on playing lounge piano and watch people drift in singly and depart doubly.

I've always had the looks, but I lack the tactics. Now that I'm nineteen and allowed in bars, I can observe the way other people do it. That's why I got this job. Mum doesn't know what to make of it. I worry her. In my mind I've raised great walls with only a few gates in them, protecting myself from the threatening touch of hurtful caring, mine or anybody else's, the slashing, uncertain weather I get when I leave myself open to elemental feelings. That last hurricane I had at thirteen, when Dad died, was enough. I let Mum inside the gates. She's the only one now. I'd rather live inside walls than wait under the open sky for the rough lick of the wind.

So I've saved myself for years, and now I wonder what for. Maybe for her. She's watching me with icy pale eyes. I press out some more syrupy stupid music, then look at her again. She's still staring. I think I'll take my break now.

They give me free drinks since they don't have to pay me. I work for contributions, and the crowd is too poor and thin tonight to make it worth my staying at the piano full time. I go to the bar and get a Tom Collins, then look over at her. She's watching me.

I've been here for three weeks and I've never responded, even though some of them had invitation in their eyes before. But tonight . . . her eyes are light through the dimness, like moonstones. I take my glass and go to her table, sitting down into silence. Doubts surface. Me? She can't mean me. What do I say? What if she refuses? What if she . . . what if she doesn't?

Her face is beautiful, glowing pale and tranquil, like the face of a drowned person against the gentle dark sea of her hair. A smile lights the lower half of her face. Her lips are pale and full. Her skin is so translucent I think if I dropped a spot of blood in each cheek it would instantly diffuse outward, like ink dropped in clear water.

"Your playing," she says, "so . . ."

I smile a little and wait for the smashy feel of deserved criticism.

"It is so full of emotion," she says, and her voice is a pure tone, stripped of half the harmonic overtones, what you get when you rub a wet finger around the lip of a crystal glass. Beautiful and

empty, with no fuzziness to blur what she's saying, so it stands unmasked in its incredible stupidity.

I smile a little more. If she's really an imbecile, none of my worries are relevant. I can accept her accolades and dismiss her from my mind and get back to watching the others.

She sees she's said something wrong. "It's not the songs," she says and makes a little face. "It's the subtext, the undercurrent. You are very talented. Your feelings project."

She's so wrong it's funny. My professors are always faulting me for soulless playing. "Technically excellent, as always, Drew, but can't you put a little more heart into it?"

"I played the dynamics."

"Exactly as marked," they say, disappointed. "Stick with Bach. At least your precision is flawless."

"Yes?" I say to this drowned madonna.

She grants me another smile, half a one anyway, and says, "Who are you?"

I don't intend to talk to her—she's a musical illiterate—but words come out anyway. I tell her all the facade stuff first, since it's a prepared speech and requires neither effort nor thought. Sophomore, majoring in music at SUI, live at home with Mum, saves rent (I don't tell her it's also because I love Mum. Nobody believes that. It goes against nature), and my name: Andrew Warren. That's one of my warding devices. People I know I'll get along with almost instantly call me Drew, as if they can see or grasp the me within the me.

She calls me Andrew.

All things thus conspiring to drive me back to my piano (sorry, break's over, I've got to get back to work, thanks for the kind words), I am surprised to find my glass empty, two hours gone, and myself still talking. When I tune in to myself, I find I am telling her the story of my life, from infancy on. I have reached the tonsillectomy at age five. "What am I saying?" I say. "I must be boring you to tears."

"Not at all," she says, her moonstone eyes intent, cloudy-clear with flat backs that reflect light. Someone has dripped a drop of blood in the center of each of her cheeks, and it diffused outward, just as I thought. She doesn't look quite so drowned any more.

I feel warm and comfortable and relaxed. There's a smile on my face, I can feel it, wide and sappy. She can call me Andrew and like idiots' delight music; I don't care any more. I think I'm in love. I look at her and those pale eyes look back, and her pale lips shape a smile in answer to mine.

"Last call for drinks," says the waitress, Cassie. She drifts off before we respond. I look around. Everyone else has gone.

I look back at her. I don't even know her name.

"Come home with me," she says.

My impulses teeter toward accepting her invitation. Then the gates close in my mind and I am standing, shaking my head. "Not tonight," I say, wanting comfort instead of adventure, feeling cowardly instead of courageous. I want home, sleep, breakfast with Mum in the morning, nothing new, no threats. I'm not ready to go from sparks to a bonfire.

She lays her long pale hand on mine. It's very cold. I feel goosebumps rise in a tide up my arm. "Come home with me," she whispers, sliding to her feet. She tucks her arm in mine, and we leave together.

She lives in the woods, far from a leaf-scattered street light; once she turns off the car lights, we sit under starry darkness. I wonder if we will do it in the car. Fear tremors through me; then desire chases it away. I have lost all feeling of control. We wait for a moment in forest-noise-filled silence. She pulls the car door handle up and slides out, the sudden light interrupting the settling dark. I get out too.

Crickets and frogs still their mating calls as she crosses the gravel and steps onto the porch. She opens the screen door and hits the light switch just inside. Once she's in the cabin, the animals start the night chorus again. I lean against the car, struggling with something, feeling that my warding devices have failed, that someone has picked the locks on all my gates and pulled me outside to stand defenseless under a stormy sky.

"Andrew?" She stands, a dark shadow in the doorway with light spilling round her edges to splash on the porch.

Where is that warm frothy feeling I had in the bar? I tell myself that's why I'm here, to recapture the pleasure I felt tonight for the first time. If that's what happens even before I kiss her, maybe afterward my walls will fall and I'll learn to weather everything, sunshine, lightning, hail.

"Andrew, come in. I'll make you some coffee. I'd like you to meet my little brother."

Coffee. The warmth draws me in. My arm is cold where she touched it. I'd like to cup my hand around a warm mug of coffee. I let the screen door slam behind me and stand blinking in the light of the front room. A boy is curled on the sofa. He yawns, stretches with the unconscious grace of a cat. A very scrawny cat.

He opens his eyes and looks at me. His eyes reflect light like his sister's. He smiles: little baby teeth with gaps in between.

"Andrew, this is Micah. Micah, Andrew." She drifts across the room like smoke. Her slate-gray dress covers her from neck to wrists and ankles, leaving only her alabaster hands and face revealed.

"Yes," I say to Micah as she vanishes through a door, "but who is she?"

"You couldn't pronounce it," says Micah. "None of them could. Call her Allie."

For a minute I feel like arguing. I'm good at languages. Then I decide to skip it.

"Please have a seat," Micah says, waving at a comfortable-looking chair. I bite my lip (a warding device) and wake up enough to wonder what I'm doing here. She didn't bring me home to neck, not with a little brother in the room. Not unless she's weird. Just my luck to get stuck with a weirdo my first try.

Micah stares at me, silver-eyed. I feel a sort of flush pass over me. "Have a seat," he says again, and I jerk my way over to the chair and collapse in it. "Talk to me," he says.

"I was in the children's ward," I say. "Bunch of other kids there and it was scary, because some of them were really sick. Some would never leave the hospital. We had jello for dinner. Mum sent me an etch-a-sketch to play with, and Dad a stuffed elephant. . . ."

It's the night before the operation and the nurse has just waked me to give me a shot in the rear when Allie comes back with the coffee. I don't notice until she screams, "You twit!" at Micah and throws coffee on him. "Couldn't wait, could you?"

I rub my eyes, then open them again. Where—who? What on earth? Where are my safe walls? Maybe this is what it's like when you take drugs. Instant total confusion. Go to sleep at the piano in a bar and wake to see two strangers fighting in a strange land.

"There, you see that, you little idiot? You disengaged wrong and mixed him up!" They look at me with clinical interest. I smile feebly.

"You shocked me out of it," says the boy.

"I can fix it this time, but don't do that again. It's too late. We waited too long. We need this one badly." She walks to me and touches my forehead with two fingers. They tingle against my skin, and I remember. Allie. Micah. Pleasure. Mmmm.

"Andrew, I'm going to take you home now," she says, taking away her hand. "But you've had a nice time tonight, haven't you?"

"Mmm," I say, smiling wide and sappy.

"You'll come back tomorrow night, won't you?"

"Mmm."

"Good boy." She gives me another of those half-smiles. Then she drives me home.

What on earth did I say to them? I wonder as I brush my teeth. God, I was stupid. I can't remember what I said, but I'm sure it was stupid. I won't see her again. I won't give her the opportunity to learn how much stupider I can be. I won't let myself feel one way or the other about her. Uncharted weather that way.

I'm all wrought up. Got to pour it out of my system the only way possible. Chopin attack with Gershwin thrown in. This is the stuff my professors never hear at school. I hit too many wrong notes. I can't stand messing up in front of people, making them feel sorry for me. But when I'm all knotted up inside, when I know Mum's at the other end of the house and won't wake, I let the music pound through me, draining off whatever the energy is and straightening me out. The "Raindrop" prelude, a good one for washing out gloom, with the sunshine edge at the end. I slap the book open and sit down, flex my fingers twice, and attack.

Madness. Chaos. The furious energy flows down my arms only to dam at my fingertips. My fingers are frozen, chunky, unresponsive. I pound my way through some warmups. It takes more effort than it did when I first started learning piano. What's wrong with me? What am I going to do with myself? I won't let it be true. I go over the warm-ups again and again and finally loosen up enough to play the prelude. Then I do bits from "Rhapsody in Blue," the octave parts, so I can make a lot of sound and fury. At last the seething in me settles and, exhausted, I fall asleep.

I've lost my flawless precision. They notice. They think I'm just tired, and they like that because it almost makes me human. I can't remember the answers in theory class. Dr. Davis gives me the first real smile I've had from him all semester.

I'm not going to the bar tonight. I think of Allie and get hot, but I'll just go on thinking about her, I guess. I'm not going to see her again.

Mum and I are eating dinner when she drives up. I hoped if I didn't seek her out, she'd stay away, but she won't, so I introduce her to Mum. Mum invites her to join us for dessert, but Allie says she's on a diet. She looks at me when she says this. Mum gets distressed for a moment, thinks about it, then almost smiles at

me. She has hoped for years that I'd find someone besides her to like. How can I tell her I don't like Allie?

"What are your interests, Allie?" Mum asks.

"I sculpt," says Allie. "Marble. Frozen motion. Poetry pinned down for eons. I'm hoping to do Andrew soon."

"Oh?" Mum notices the Andrew. She frowns.

"Wouldn't you like having him immortalized in stone? My work is representational—I mean, it imitates life. None of this abstract trash."

How dare she define representational to Mum?

"You don't believe in making statements?" Mum says. She likes modern art. She can even look at a Jackson Pollock without getting an unsmotherable urge to laugh.

"I think art ought to be accessible to everyone," says Allie.

"Like TV," Mum says. "Shoot for the lowest common denominator."

"Absolutely. Democratic art," says Allie. "Finished, Andrew? Come on."

Having listened to her again and having decided rationally that I really don't like her, I see no reason to go with her. But she stares at me with those flat-backed silver eyes, and I feel heat prickles. I rise to my feet. "Bye, Mum," I say. Mum touches my arm, and I look down at her eyes. Maple syrup brown with no metal in them. For a second I'm struggling again. Allie touches my hand. I trot out of the house at her heels.

Tonight Micah makes the coffee. Allie sits and pins me to the chair with her eyes until he gets back. Then she prompts me and I start talking to them. At them. For them. I can't switch myself off. Hours slide away, as I sink into the flow of my own story, reliving bits of life I thought I'd lost, warmth spreading through me because two people are uncritically fascinated by everything I have to say.

"That's enough for tonight," Allie says at last when I have finished telling them about my comic-book file. She smiles at me, this time a real smile, full of sweetness. Micah looks different too. His cheeks are rosy, and he's fleshed out a bit. He's almost attractive.

When she drops me off, I stand and watch her tail-lights retreat. Click click click. Gates try to lock inside me. Too late, I think, too late, not much left to guard now. I shiver and wonder where that thought came from.

Going through the house I keep quiet, but in my room I sit on the bed, take off my shoes, and throw them at the wall. What's

happening to me? Why are they interested? What the hell will they do with the information when they've got it? What have I told them? I can't remember. I search and search, and I can't remember a word I've said to them.

I sit down at the piano, ready to knock out some scary Scott Joplin, a bit from Bink's Waltz. I start. At least, I try to start. My fingers feel like pieces of chalk, blocky, unbendable. They crash down on the keys. Discords crash back, unchords, nonchords. I turn my palms up and bend my fingers. They all move together. Panic floods me. Sweat starts to come, slicking my palms. All right. Index finger, bend NOW.

It bends. So do all the others.

Drugs. They must be drugging my coffee. Maybe I'm paralyzed. Arthritis, like that kid in the rocking chair in the TV commercial.

My hands don't hurt. They just don't work.

Should I wake Mum? Only scare her. Nothing I can do tonight. Tomorrow I'll see a doctor.

How can I lose my piano playing? It's the only place where I open the gates. . . .

The alarm goes off and I don't want to hear it. Mum wakes me on her way to the kitchen. It's her turn to make breakfast. I get up, shower. Warm water feels good. I've been very cold recently. The soap makes lots of lather. I check it. It's still Ivory, but it's acting funny. It scrapes off on my chest. That can't be right. I touch my chest. Muscles harder than when I flex them to lift weights. Weird.

I yawn and dismiss it, then climb out and towel off. It's too soon to shave again, I decide, looking in the mirror. My jaw looks very firm. No stubble yet.

The buttons on my shirt keep squirting out between my fingers like watermelon seeds. I throw the shirt on the floor and get out a tee shirt.

Mum watches me while I try to eat. The fork keeps getting away, and when it doesn't, the eggs slide off it. I grasp it firmly and make progress, but Mum's still watching. "What is it?" I say. I know my wearing a tee shirt to school is unusual, but it's not worth this kind of scrutiny.

"It's your hands," she says.

"Hands?" I wave them at her, scooping air, enjoying the fluid feel, all fingers synchronized. They twist and cup air like birds' wings.

"I couldn't sleep last night. I was reading in the living room. I heard you practicing," she says.

I try to remember. Last night. Allie. Mmmm. But no practicing. I was too tired when I got home. I didn't even want to wake up today. Wait . . . practicing? Wait.

"It sounded awful, Drew. What's wrong?"

Wait. Where are the gates? I can't even get inside them myself today. Practicing? "Nothing's wrong," I hear myself say. "I was just banging, Mum. I think I'm going to take up drums. Piano is too hard to get hold of. You can't make it loud enough." Did I say that? Maybe it's true. Piano's like pinball: get your adrenaline rushing, fill you with pent-up energy, and there you are, stuck with finger exercises. Drums are like baseball. Swing that bat. Run like hell. Use up that energy. What am I going on about?

"Drew," says Mum, knocking on my head, "anybody home in there?"

"No," I say, and grin. What? Somebody's home, but I don't think it's me. "I gotta go now."

Classes wash over me as I try to concentrate, marshal facts, figure out what's happened to me. Who am I? I am Drew, a very secret person, try to cut through the frosting and you hit the walls outside me and bounce back. Who is Allie? Don't know who. She's more of a what: tall and built, with beautiful silver-blue eyes and lips full and red as the inside of a pomegranate. I've never heard her laugh. I think I've met her twice. I can't remember what we did. Why do I get this weird hungry feeling when I think about her? I feel colder now than I ever did before. Her smile last night promised things. But she was rude to Mum. I don't want to see her again. There are other people.

It's impossible to take notes today. My hand won't hold a pen. It's worse than the time I broke my arm and had to write right-handed. Or was that the second time? When I was eight. . . . When I was eight. . . . I was never eight.

I sit up with a jolt. I was never six or seven or any age up til twelve. Total blank. Twelve. My first memory: Dad and me trying to fly a kite up at the elementary school. Trees catch it. We laugh about it. Mum, who has been watching, says it's free now to build a nest, maybe next spring little kites will come down on strings like baby spiders. We all run home to cocoa, books, the piano, the fireplace. Mark, my best friend next door, is too sick to come over; it has to be real flu since this is a weekend.

I got inside my own gates far enough to dredge up that memory. I look around the classroom. I'm alone with the chalk dust. Theory

class ended half an hour ago. I have to go home right now and find out if I was dropped on the planet as a twelve-year-old or if there's evidence I actually grew up here.

The house is empty when I get there. Mum's off librarianing, but I know where she keeps the photo albums. I pull out an old red one. My stomach rumbles, warning me to back off, but I ignore it and lift the cover. Inside there's an eight-by-ten color picture of a kid, eight or so, summer-bleached red-gold hair (grandfather's color, Mum told me), brown eyes, staring up at me with the same mournful concentration as the jowly buff-colored dog he's got his arm around. I don't remember that dog, but the kid has to be me. I don't remember that dog . . .

She knows where I live. What am I going to do?

I sit down on the couch and hug myself. Gates, where were you when I needed you? She and her brother have burgled me. They've been skimming off my memories, all the things that make me *me*. Pretty soon they'll hit Dad's death and all the good parts will be gone, leaving the ruins of the past six years when I haven't done any growing, when I've been too preoccupied with building walls instead. . . .

How do I know that?

—I told you, says Dad's memory. —Somewhere inside you there's a piece of me. Think harder, Drew. Save yourself. Save me. Get out of this and come back to life. Ellen needs you.

How can I fight a thing like Allie? I don't even know what she is. I hold out my hands and look at them. Index, bend, I command. All the fingers bend. She's taken my memories, and she's taken my only release. If she takes the rest of me, nobody will be here for Mum. Now that I think of it, I've been more ghost than person since I lost Dad, but I'm sure Mum would rather have me than nobody.

—Think, Drew.

Allie and Micah are siphoning me. Slowly. I wonder what their intake levels are?

What will they do with a flood?

Tonight she doesn't sit me down in the chair. She lights an oil lamp instead. I see the light through the edges of her fingers. Red. The color of life. Life she stole from me.

"I want to show you my sculptures," she says. "They're out back."

This is a distraction when I'm so keyed up. I'm ready to spring

my trap, and here she is taking me on a detour. But I'll have to follow her lead. I don't want her getting suspicious.

Micah follows us through the kitchen. There's a jar of instant coffee on the counter, and a mug. A tea kettle sits on the stove. There are no other dishes.

We go through the back door and step out into the night. Instant silence. The crickets don't like her either.

In the grove the light falls over three statues. No marble chips on the ground, though. Either she moved them here after she finished making them, or she's incredibly tidy. She introduces them to me. "Dennis," she says.

Dennis is a stocky young tough. He wears half a sneer, as if he started a good one and then got shocked out of it. He stands there in his marble with his hands out a little.

"Leonard," says Allie, leading me to the next one. He has the same look of surprised dismay. He also has an athlete's build but he's not doing a thing with it. He just stands there.

"Bruce," she says. Bruce is spindly. She did well by his glasses. He has one hand up, reaching to push the glasses back up his nose. His eyebrows are up in astonishment.

"Well?" says Allie, smiling at me.

"You call this art?" I say. "Why on earth didn't you *do* anything with them? The technique is flawless, but the result is . . . the result—" God, listen to me. I'm telling her what everyone always tells me. "The result is soulless. Boring."

She's shocked at first. Then interest creeps in. "What do you mean?" she asks.

"Well, hell, you spend all this effort on getting them to look *real*, yet in the end they aren't even compelling. Suppose you got Bruce holding a book and looking like he's a giant despite his build because knowledge makes him that way. I mean, it's a cliché, but it's better than this—"

"This isn't important," says Micah. I'd forgotten him. I look down at him. He looks hungry.

The trap. I must remember.

Allie takes my hand and leads me to a gap between two trees. "Show me, Andrew. Strike a pose that means You."

"Huh?" Micah smiles up at me and touches my leg. Oh, god. So that's it. Of course they've fed before, but not on flesh. Ashes to ashes, and dust—to marble. "All right," I say, poisoning my trap. I take a deep breath, turn my face to the leaves overhead, and throw out my arms. Allie touches my hand. They're both in po-

sition. No talking this time. Let it rain. Let it pour. Let the floodgates open.

A trickle. Then a torrent. All the rage and fear, the fury and horror, the anger and hate and despair I felt when I lost him. Every hurricane and typhoon I can find. I haven't been keeping the weather out all these years. I've been locking it in. It's huge and fierce and awesome. It lasts for ages.

I'm crying. Statues can't cry. I lift my hand away from Allie's touch to rub my eyes. Then I look at them.

She and Micah are very, very pale.

My dog's name was Georgia. No. My dog's name was Sparks. Naw. King. A German shepherd, he was. Nonsense. I have a calico cat I call Amanuensis.

"I had a bloodhound named Georgia," I say aloud, and "who the hell are you?"

"Leonard."

"Dennis."

"Bruce. The residuals. That was fascinating. What happened?"

I look carefully at Allie. I touch her cheek. Stone. She and Micah are both twisted in agony, their faces midway between ecstasy and horror. Art. I breathe hard and wipe my eyes again. "I think I overloaded them," I say, swallowing a last sob. I look at my fingers. They've gotten back their individuality. I'm going to play such passionate music I'll drive my profs crazy.

"Why have you got such wiry forearms and such poor chest development?" asks Leonard. "I'm going to put us in training."

"Are you taking any biology this semester?" Bruce asks.

"You got a car? You can have mine," says Dennis.

"Wait a minute," I say. Dad's dead and I'm alive and now I have to figure out what to do with strange people inside my head? Much too close. How can I shut the gates and keep them out? They can ooze through the walls.

Damn. I just knocked down all the walls, anyhow.

Mum isn't used to having much of a me around the house. Now there's Us. What will she do with a flood?

Her being Mum, I bet she knows where the sandbags are. ●





art: Theresa Florenza

VERONICA

Veronica Iss,
My love in all four of my hearts,
My antennas quiver for your smell.
I take in chlorine,
And expell oxygen only in your sight.
My pincers grasp nothing,
When they are not in your joy spots.
Let us lay eggs in a mutual nest.
Even my orthodaughters call out your name,
Only.
My memories are of last moons rise,
And our shaking.
My mentation is blurred,
Integral calculus is a mystery to me now.
Consider my name in your next family discussion,
And rule on my plea favorably.
I await your love arts,
Do not let my glands wither untasted,
For I love you,
Veronica Iss.

—Wayne A. Kallunki



THE NANNY

by Thomas Wylde

The author is in his mid-thirties and claims to be an intermittent but determined writer. "The Nanny" marks his tenth sale, his first to *Asfm*.

art: Robert Walters





Eismann woke up eighteen years too early.

He woke up panting, and the lights were on already. There was something wrong with the gravity; there wasn't any.

Surely, he thought, there ought to be *some* gravity.

The lid on his sleepbox was open and he heard two things: a high whistling sound like the air running out, and a faint clicking sound like an alarm bell tired of ringing.

Eismann's mouth was crackling dry, as evil tasting as a mummy's cigar. His headache was increasing, but from somewhere deep inside, where his training was stored, came an urgent warning about the air pressure. . . .

He thought: the world is destroyed, or I wouldn't be here now.

It was an odd thought, and he searched his memory for help.

The last day. There had to be a Last Day. And a last *minute*, when they came for him, when his luck ran out—when everybody's luck ran out—but he couldn't find it.

He looked around. The room was familiar and anonymous — merely a small compartment, softly lighted. A jail cell, probably (he thought). There was a meal slot—not yet used—and another hole (he suddenly remembered) that would take his wastes and send them indirectly back to the meal slot. Tidy, but disgusting. Part of the game. (What game? he wondered.)

The alarm bell was still ringing—clicking, anyway—and Eismann figured it was about time to look into the matter.

He rolled painfully out of the sleepbox and floated free. He followed the whistling sound to a hole in the corner, down at deck level. Air was escaping through the hole at supersonic speed, passing out into interstellar space.

Space. I'm in space. Therefore the world is destroyed. . . .

The leak was small. Apparently something had hit the ship at the bulkhead. He guessed most of the damage was "below" him in the evacuated compartment where the eggs were stored.

The eggs. . . ?

Damn it, he thought. Why the hell didn't they leave him something to remind him what the hell was going on? A simple comic book, anything to jog his sleepy brain cells.

So—he was in interstellar space with the eggs, therefore the world was destroyed.

"And I only am escaped alone to—"

Job's messengers, he thought. But there were *four* of them. There are supposed to be two of *us*.

The other sleepbox was less accessible—the cramped shuttle didn't allow side-by-side arrangements. Eismann ignored for the moment the airleak—God knew how long it had already been leaking—and dove across the compartment for the second sleepbox.

There was the desiccated body of a man inside. The face was gone, but the name on the jumpsuit was familiar. It was Mackay, one of the meditechs at the orbital station—

Eismann suddenly remembered the station, how the ten of them had been in readiness, working the spy cameras and the laser downlinks, evaluating data, waiting suspensively for the Big Blowup.

—Mackay, the man everyone thought was a nark or a NASA spy. He must have been the one who put Eismann in the sleepbox and hooked him up. Then he'd tried to get himself set. And failed.

Things must have been pretty hectic at the end. A mutiny, maybe, or sabotage—anything to get free of the station and on the way. They had been pretty vulnerable up there, drifting along in the center of several laser cannon sights.

Eismann lowered the lid on the sleepbox. So much for his partner. Fine. Nobody liked the guy anyway.

You saved my life, he thought. Excuse me if I don't thank you right away.

He wanted to find out how bad things were first.

Eismann got busy.

He sealed the leak with some plastic gunk from a repair locker. In ten minutes the oxygen was steady at .3 atmospheres. It was too late for his head or his raw throat. He went looking for the medicine dispenser and got some aspirin and something sour to suck on.

The alarm bell continued to click, so he checked the mission status board. It was then he found out he had awakened eighteen years too early.

There was no gravity because the deceleration burn was sixteen years away. He was still in the long coasting part of the trip.

Things were starting to drift back to him.

The mission—his crushing responsibility: in the event the world is destroyed, he and his ship were to leave the solar system on the small but not insignificant chance he could locate a habitable

planet where the specially created and fertilized eggs could be brought into adulthood. A new race of Man, preserved and safe to start again.

It was Eismann's duty to raise the fortunate members of this new race, to nurture and teach them, to protect and parent them—he was their Nanny. And he didn't even *like* children.

Now he was awake eighteen years too early, eighteen years before the first planet checkouts. Unless he could get his sleepbox working again, he'd have to hang around those eighteen years, losing his vitality all the while, waiting for the ship to reach the star system and analyze the first stinking, long-shot planet. And *if* it were habitable, he'd pop the eggs—twenty at a time—into the mechanical wombs.

A new generation every nine months—and there were twenty generations of eggs aboard. Enough colonists to go up against whatever a hostile planet could hit them with, enough warm bodies to survive the inevitable setbacks. Enough, maybe, to re-establish Man in the galaxy.

It wasn't going to be that easy.

Eismann found out why he was awake eighteen years early: whatever collided with the ship had damaged the liquid gas tanks. He came awake because his sleepbox had run low of coolant and triggered emergency revival procedures. There was no going back.

The same system supplied coolant for zygote storage.

Twenty generations of the last hope of Man were going to rot in the next compartment. The world *was* destroyed now, utterly. (And I only am escaped alone to tell thee. . . .)

All right, Eismann. Heads up. There has to be *something* you can do.

He wedged himself in front of the computer terminal and began typing.

In ten minutes he'd transferred twenty eggs—ten each male and female—into the twenty wombs. As each zygote was encapsulated and monitored, he learned if it was alive or dead.

He had to go through a hundred eggs to find his twenty.

But they were the best twenty on the DNA lists, the most able-to-survive of an already impressively talented collection of genetically manipulated zygotes.

The cream of the crop, he thought.

(The proud Nanny . . .)

My twenty babies—you've got the Iceman on your side. We'll make it yet.

When he began asking some tougher questions, the computer kicked out an alarming message apparently left for him:

How do you like that, Eismann? You bastard sinner! How many more bombs are there? You're so smart—you know what Man needs to survive—you figure it out!

So it hadn't been a collision after all. A bomb.

There had been fanatical opposition to the so-called Egg Trip. (Who says Man may survive God's wrath?)

On the other hand, there were those who just hated Eismann—the Iceman—as they watched him move up the Last Man Alive List. Maybe they thought he moved up too fast, especially after Kathy's death.

Eismann shook his head slightly, more like a shiver. It had been an accident, but half of them thought he'd done it on purpose. In any case, the result of that midnight car crash was obvious: when Kathy died his stock rose. Now he was free, unattached (and unscratched)—a bona fide One Way Man. Kathy had been on that list too. . . .

Eismann cleared the message on the computer screen. There would be plenty of time to hash over the Good Ol' Days.

Back to work, sinner.

The ship's course had been thrown off by the explosion, but corrective burns had already been made. They were back on course, coasting at .2 speed of light.

Food was plentiful—some five years' worth for 135 persons of varying ages and requirements, enough surely to maintain 22 souls for eighteen extra shipboard years. No problem, except . . . except the food was all dehydrated. Of course.

Any planet capable of supporting humans *had* to have *some* water. That was basic. And the children were not to be born until such a planet was already underfoot.

He checked the life-support systems, checked the crucial water supply. . . .

It was this way: the water recycled through the food/waste systems, and though the original plan called for Eismann to be up and about for only a few months prior to a landing, there was enough reserve water to make his stay quite comfortable.

But twenty children? Ultimately twenty-two adults?

No way.

Too damned much protoplasm, that's all.

Eismann looked at the computer screen readout, pondering the twenty numbers arranged in two neat columns.

"Some of you guys," he said—the Iceman Cometh—"have got to go. Sorry."

Which ones? Easy: let the computer decide. The big question: *how many?*

Eismann asked.

Eighteen.

Well, hell . . . there was no point in arguing. He had to jettison eighteen eggs. He said, "Adam and Eve time."

Then he thought: Why one each? Why not two females?

He could nearly double the chances of Man's survival if he grew himself a couple wives.

He asked the computer to list the two best females. Hmmm. No hurry, really.

Three-hundred-eighty eggs were dead or dying in the ruptured storage compartment. Nothing he could do about that. It's true he had a water shortage, but that problem wouldn't become acute for years, really.

Oh, God . . .

He had a vision: twenty nervous little girls, all lined up, a shadow passing overhead—the Iceman, brother—touching eighteen blonde heads, one by one, yanking them out of line and over to the waste disposal maw, which was so small he'd be forced to butcher . . .

No! The decision had to be made *now*, while the eggs were still microscopic abstractions. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Two females, then. Or one of each . . .

Then it occurred to him that by the time he'd have to report for stud duty he'd be over sixty.

What if I'm not fertile?

Fertile . . . infertile . . . that thought set off an old memory. Something they said during the long, boring pre-mission discussions . . . those cold men (the real Icemen) . . . a solution to an old cultural problem . . . uncles and nieces . . . the question of ostensible incest . . .

They had supposed he'd be among the young population in better, younger shape, his aging severely retarded by the sleep-box.

They wanted a clean start with this population—his filthy, contaminating genes were not allowed. He was, after all, just the bus driver.

So they sterilized him, even *before* Kathy's death.

God, he really moved up the list *that time*. The staff admired

(and hated) him for his decision. Boy, they said, you really *do* wanna be the Last Man, don't you? He just smiled coldly—the Iceman—then they hated (and envied) him all the more. At that cynical time nobody considered the possibility Eismann really *cared* about the future of Man. Oh, well . . . ancient history.

Okay, back to square one: Adam and Eve. It was a story he could tell Adam when he was old enough to appreciate it.

On second thought, better not. By that time the dude might be willing—and certainly able—to deck his old Nanny. . . .

Eismann selected the two eggs, designated one of the pair of emergency water tanks for their use, then prepared to empty the remaining wombs. He hesitated again.

He knew (*damn it!*) that success of his mission demanded he wait as long as possible. Any birth defect could be disastrous. One sudden infant death (if there were only two in the running) would mean defeat; utter, hopeless defeat.

He *had* to let *twenty* fetuses come to term. He *had* to wait at least until their first birthday before selecting the fortunate two. One-year-old babies would not be conscious of his intent. They would not suffer. . . .

He *knew* what must be done.

This was why they'd chosen him (the Iceman). Hard decisions had to be made. Hadn't he demonstrated he was up to it? (That accident with Kathy worked—horribly—to his advantage. He knew it—and it made him wonder.) They needed a hard-core *survivor* to run this mission, and that's what they got. Congratulations, suckers. . . .

Yeah, he knew what had to be done. But he could not face the horror of that delayed selection. It was simply too gruesome.

Eismann the Iceman. *My ass* . . .

He reached out and dumped the eighteen eggs.

Now there are just the three of us.

Three of us, plus two each one-hundred-liter water tanks. He called up a water-inventory display. There was only one code on the screen. He fiddled with the computer, asking after the second water tank.

It took several minutes to find out—then more minutes to check and confirm—that the second tank was empty. Apparently he'd dumped it with the eighteen zygotes.

Babies and bathwater . . .

He stared at the computer screen. No question about it: there was now only enough water for two full-grown adults, plus a little extra for emergencies. Case closed.

It was clear that before the eighteen years were up there would only be two humans aboard the ship.

Eismann wouldn't be one of them.

Did I do that? he wondered. Or was that another of the "bombs" they promised? Does it matter now?

He and the computer got together on a little calculation. Assuming the two kids grew at the optimum rate, there'd come a time when the three of them would have to say their goodbyes. Say seven or eight years after birth . . .

Eismann sighed and went on with his chores. He had to do something about Mackay's mummified body, so he bagged it in plastic and shoved it into the trash compactor.

His finger hesitated above the RUN switch.

"Well, Mackay, you did your job. And you almost made it yourself. Maybe I'd have got to like you after a few years. And maybe not. As for thanking you—well, let's just say I'm still thinking about it." Then he pushed the button and drifted away.

"See you in nine years. More or less."

Eismann slipped into the webbing of the inoperative sleepbox, his day's work done. He investigated his personal locker (which some NASA joker had named *Eisbox*) and found a desiccated cigar. Felicitations & Bon Voyage, sucker. He unwrapped the cigar, broke it in two, and began to chew on one stale end. He knew he couldn't light it, but this was better than nothing.

After a minute he realized he felt pretty good. The Big Trip was underway—and under control. The Earth was—well, screw the Earth. *He* was the Earth now. Man still had a chance. NASA would have been proud . . . not that he cared. He was the Iceman, right? He didn't need anybody to *approve* his actions, right? Isn't that right (damn it)?

Settle down, Eismann. You done good. Now shut up.

He stretched out and thought a long time about the kind of tapes he'd leave behind for the benefit of Mankind. Instructions on how to start up a new human colony . . .

If only he *knew* how.

II

Eismann had plenty of time to reacquaint himself with the particulars of the mission.

He was on his way to Alpha Centauri.

There had been a lot of discussion during the planning stages

of the mission, a lot of rather bitter argument. The mission was obviously a one-shot deal—all or nothing.

From the start, though, Alpha Centauri was the logical choice. Not only was it the closest—and hence the shortest trip—but the star system contained one extremely close copy of Sol, plus a lesser star of some possibilities. The chances of finding an Earth-type planet in this area was estimated as high as ten percent. Virtually the best bet going.

Man's lifeboat was a hastily thrown together patch-up job, a reworked third-generation space shuttle. For years they'd been siphoning off anti-matter from the busy weapons labs, putting together enough for the deceleration burn. Then they used every resource—huge chemical rocket drop-off boosters, matter/anti-matter reactors, and a close-solar whip orbit—to get the shuttle on its way.

They'd set him going at .2 cee. The deceleration burn would be a slow, matter/anti-matter burn at about one-tenth gee. Two years of deceleration. Total trip time: twenty-two years.

With luck.

Eismann spent a few hours exploring what parts of the shuttle he could get into.

Most of the cavernous payload bay was filled with electromagnetic matter/anti-matter fuel tanks. The rest was food—with automatic retrieval—then seed, nitrogen-fixing soil bacteria, fertilizer, and too little water. This whole area was sealed off.

The cockpit was crammed with extra life-support equipment and the planetary analysis experiments, but there was still enough room to pull himself into the one pilot seat left. He looked out the window.

The shuttle still faced forward—to be turned around before the deceleration burn—and Alpha Centauri was a visual binary dead ahead. At .2 cee the orange B star was shifted to blue, the yellow A star to blue-violet.

Though planetary entry would be automatic, the actual landing of the shuttle was too problematical for total computer control. There'd be oceans—not much reason to land if there weren't—and he'd try to put the ship down in a shallow, protected bay.

It was going to be tricky. Space shuttles, because of their ambivalent natures, always seemed to land too damn fast. He touched the controls and picked up a static charge of stage fright, as though the landing were coming up in *minutes* instead of—

He laughed suddenly, spraying out soggy flakes of his chewed-up cigar.

The landing was eighteen years off; plenty of time to—

He stopped laughing.

Well, it was not *his* problem, the landing . . . but how would *they* handle it, his kids? How the hell could they spend the last ten years of the trip without him—and then know how to make the landing?

He had spent years learning to pilot the beast, and there was no guarantee *he'd* remember enough, despite programmed rehearsals.

What the hell chance would *they* have?

He began to wonder if he was even *supposed* to succeed. Had they picked him in order to *make sure* the mission failed? He'd been the Iceman all his life—forced into the role by the accident of his name. Was that a clue? Had they seen some flaw, smoothed over by his unconscious role-playing, that they *expected* to break him apart?

He'd already *failed* to meet the egg-selection problem head on. Now here he was thinking up excuses to stay alive (the essential pilot)—at the expense of the entire mission.

Was he acting out his fatal weakness, just as someone high up in mission planning suspected he would?

The note had threatened him with more bombs. Maybe they meant *him*.

The ultimate doomsday device—all he had to do was reach out and caress the control board, flicking a few inappropriate switches, and the mission would be over. Mankind would be dead. All very sanitary.

It would save a *lot* of trouble.

Eismann suddenly reached out and snapped on the VHF radio. He'd never even thought to check. What if the Earth was *not* destroyed? What if this was all just a . . . a what? A joke? A prank? A damned expensive prank.

The speaker hissed uniformly as the radio scanned for signals. Nothing.

Let's see, he thought. I've been on my way four years—or so the computer says—at .2 speed of light. Earth is directly behind me (more or less) about eight-tenths of a light-year away. Commink delay time 19 months and change—that's a strain on snappy conversation.

Tuning in a *specific* channel would require some calculation. The red shift of a 50 MHZ signal coming out of a rapidly receding

Earth would be about ten megahertz. If he tried to broadcast—but no, there was no point in that. He was too far away; it was too late.

So, he was alone. Probably. There'd been rumors about another shuttle headed in another direction. And the Soviets might have set something up—if there'd been time. It was all speculation. *He* was alone, at least. And the radio was silent. (He declined to aim his directional antenna at anything but the Solar System. For the moment he didn't want any big surprises.)

Better not to think too hard about any part of this. Not now, not yet. He'd have years to brood about this mission, to decide if he really wanted to go through with it.

Eismann climbed out of the cockpit and drifted back to the sleepbox.

In the two activated wombs the bodies formed, without hope and without despair, cell upon cell, the heirs of Man.

III

Eismann sweated in the elastic bicycle, nearing the end of his second exercise hour.

"How's that?" he said, shaking sweat out of his eyes.

The twins—the mechanical wombs had disgorged them precisely ten minutes apart—clung to the webbing of the sleepbox and watched quietly.

Ten months old, naked—as was Eismann nowadays—and already attentive, already clinging like bald monkeys to the webbing, swaying in zero gee. They seemed amused.

The only time they cried was just *before* fouling themselves. He decided they were afraid of the whining hand vacuum he chased them with, collecting their wastes. He'd *conditioned* a pre-evacuation fear. He wondered what Freud would have made of it. He hoped it wouldn't scar their psyches too badly.

He came out of his exercise corner and floated through the cool air toward them. He jammed the green hunk of soft plastic in his mouth (the lone cigar had long since been chewed to pieces).

He decelerated on the webbing and poked the boy in the gut. "How ya doing, guy?"

He couldn't bring himself to name the children. It was simply too *momentous*. He'd let the kids name themselves when they were old enough to know what names were for.

"You too, girl," he said, fingering her head.

The twins were tiny, very frail.

In zero gee they got no exercise just hanging around. And they were too young to learn any of the special zero gee routines that he performed so religiously.

He stared at them, and they back at him, their eyes large and trusting. They never complained.

He shook his head at them and smiled sadly.

Every day he had an impulse to strangle them.

"What am I getting you into?"

They looked ordinary enough, despite zero gee frailty. Eismann kept expecting to see signs of their genetic superiority. The eggs and sperm cells that produced the frozen zygotes were rumored to be illegally manipulated—super clean, recessive gene weeded, piggy-backed, quadruple stranded DNA—it was never clear exactly what had been done. The idea was to compensate for the colony's severely limited gene pool. The mission planners couldn't have known *how* limited it was going to be. These kids, and their children—there was no telling what might develop.

Anyway, it was not his problem.

He held out his forefinger and the little boy took it, floating away from the webbing.

"You're light as a feather, my friend. You know that?"

The little guy reached back as his "sister" reached out. Now both babies floated free from the sleepbox webbing, hand in hand.

Eismann pulled his finger away, and the twins floated before his face, watching.

He felt the sweat going off his body, going into the air, going ultimately into the water retrieval system and back into the reservoir.

He thought a lot about the water in that reservoir.

Every gram the babies gained came from that reservoir, water permanently removed from the cycle.

"How long before you're on your own, hunh?"

And then what will you do?

The twins refused to exercise.

They'd whine and complain (*now* they complained) and bounce off the ceiling a few times. It was easy to catch them, the room was so small, but he hated to force them into the elastic bike if they were so set against it.

Five years old, and heavy into anarchy. Same old story.

The girl was Kathy, a name she insisted had to come from him. He regretted it now. Maybe she'd change it later.

The boy was Ice. He had insisted on taking Eismann's name, calling himself variously "Eismann II" and "Eismann too."

Eismann urged him to change it, but the kid would have at least part of his name. Eismann thought calling him *Mann* was too pretentious, so they settled on *Ice*. He hoped that, too, would change with time.

Time . . .

At the rate they were growing—*slowly*—the damned deadline kept moving back.

He brooded about it, but it was not something they discussed, though the kids seemed emotionally and mentally ready to take on any load. It was phenomenal, really, how quickly they developed in that area.

They both spent hours before the computer screen: Q&A.

Eismann spent a lot of time querying the computer himself, trying to find out exactly what had happened on Earth. But there was nothing, no current history readout to augment his vague memories of heightened tension in the world. He so utterly failed to remember the final day—the moment when they actually came for him—that he wondered if perhaps they didn't fiddle with his mind. Maybe there was something built into the sleepbox to blank his memories. Did that make sense?

He had a theory. The events leading up to the Last Day of the Earth—pathetic, outrageous, prideful and greedy as they must have been—were likely to cast doubt on the worthiness of Man to continue as a species in the universe. Maybe they wanted to prevent him from pre-judging Man. They probably cursed the flimsy technology that kept them from eliminating him altogether. They had to trust him completely. Too bad.

Now they counted on him to—

"That's not right," he said, wedged in front of the computer keyboard.

"They" no longer counted on him. "They" were long gone. If "they" existed still on Earth, if there was any bombed-out remnant of human life on that diseased, dying planet, Eismann doubted any of them even knew of this mission—or would care. "They" had their own problems.

No, the only people who counted on him now were the twins. They required his help, *demand*ed it. And for now, they got it.

The artificial "day/night" cycles continued to pile up as the years drifted past. They settled into an unending series of routines: the bedtime routine, when Eismann tried to remember sto-

ries to tell them, invariably choosing something too childish or too adult for them—the twins were alternately bored or baffled; the “work” routine, when he tried to get them to help with the housekeeping of the shuttle, vacuuming and filter cleaning and checking the status of life support systems. The computer kept up a steady drizzle of preventative maintenance jobs for them, but the twins only worked hard on things they’d never done before, like calibrating the instruments that analyzed the waste/food cycle for impurities. And finally, there was the “play” routine, when Eismann tried to sneak in some organized exercise for the twins—a plan they saw through from the earliest attempts, escaping with zestful ease and generally causing more work for Eismann than it was all worth.

And what, exactly, was it all worth? He didn’t know. The “importance” of the mission waxed and waned on its own routine schedule, as if tied to some remnant of tidal force in Eismann’s mind. Some days the responsibility squashed him flat, on others it exhilarated him. Most of the time it meant nothing at all; the “mission” floated high above his consciousness, like a wispy cloud in a clear blue sky—it could safely be ignored because there would be plenty of time to think about it later. He was surprised, every now and then, to remember he hadn’t yet come to a conclusion: was human life worth preserving?

There were adventures to mark the passage of time. When the twins were six or so, Eismann woke up with a toothache. After weeks of enduring the throbbing pain he decided he’d have to pull the tooth. He searched through the shuttle tool kit and found a pair of pliers, but they looked awfully unwieldy. Consulting the computer he located an excellent set of dentist’s tools—complete with crash-course cheat sheet instruction manual—but the storage code indicated the pack was stashed deep within the cargo hold and not available to him. It would be the pliers or nothing.

The twins floated nearby, amused and interested in this novel activity. “Whatcha going to do, Eismann?”

“This is serious medical business,” he said.

“We know.”

Ice nudged Kathy and reached for a bulkhead gripbar, grinning. Anything to break up the routine, even “serious medical business.”

Eismann wedged himself into the vanity before the stainless steel mirror. He probed awkwardly with the pliers. Somewhere somebody was giggling.

There was no trouble finding the right tooth—he had only to tap it gently to send a ghost-nail through his lower jaw—but figuring out how best to grip the thing was a problem. The pliers weren't shaped right for a smooth yank outward. He'd have to pull the tooth upward.

Kathy clung to his forearm, her mood locked into his, now dark and gloomy. He positioned the pliers over the tooth and gently squeezed. He pinched his gum and involuntarily jerked his arm, his eyes blinking tears. Kathy hung onto his elbow. "Push off!" he told her, but it must not have sounded right with a pair of pliers in his mouth. She held on, looking concerned. A moment later the pliers' grip was right and he yanked hard.

The tooth broke in two and the pliers slipped, smacking his upper molars at the gumline. He yelled and jerked his hand away, accidentally biting his knuckles. The pliers swung out and smacked Kathy on the arm, sending her flying across the compartment where she smashed into the cockpit ladder.

Eismann roared in pain and regret and pushed off after her, trailing small globules of bright red blood. Kathy had bounced by then, and Ice—who had stayed clear throughout—pushed off in a trajectory to intercept. Eismann got to her first. Her eyes were wide with fright and pain, and he cursed himself as he assessed her injuries: a broken left ulna where his pliers had struck, and a broken right femur where she'd hit the ladder. He felt small hands tighten painfully about his throat. "Leave her alone!" screamed Ice.

"Leave *me* alone, goddamn it!" he yelled back, sending a necklace of darkening blood over his shoulder. He finally had to put Ice in the Place, an area in the center of the compartment, out of reach of bulkhead or handhold. Ice would be stranded there until Eismann came for him.

Eismann consulted the computer Medifax file, then gave Kathy a half-ampule of Demeraid before setting the fractures. She cried slowly as he worked, mumbling her apologies for getting in his way. Ice struggled and twisted in the Place, screaming to be set free. Eismann ignored him. Ice was naked, of course, so he had nothing to throw, nothing to use as reaction mass. He was stuck good and he knew it, and his frustration was a torment to them all. He made sure of that.

After he'd put Kathy to bed—and after assuring her he didn't blame her for any of this—Eismann went to talk to Ice. "It was an accident, damn it," he said, slurring his words a little as he worked his tongue around an aching mouth. The bleeding had

stopped, but the pain was more real than the steel in the shuttle's superstructure. And he had yet to face the other half of that broken tooth, still anchored in his throbbing jaw.

Ice stared at him sullenly. "Let me go."

Eismann took a breath. "*She* forgives me."

"She can if she wants."

"My tooth hurts."

"That's too bad."

Eismann stayed by the wall, out of reach. Ice floated motionless in the Place, hands on his hips.

God, he's pissed, thought Eismann. And not afraid to show it. Not like me.

"You want to protect her," Eismann said.

"Of course."

"She's not your *sister*, you know."

"Yes she is!"

Eismann looked away. It was too early to go into *that*. He said, "It doesn't matter. You should protect her. But not against *me*. You have to know I'll never want to hurt her. Never."

And he thought: but I haven't decided yet, have I? I may even *kill* her, kill *both* of them. Isn't that right? Isn't that still a possibility?

His hand whipped out and grabbed Ice by the ankle. He spun him around and aimed him at the sleepbox where Kathy floated, her frail limbs splinted and gunked in fast-setting plastic. He pushed him—gently. "Go to bed, Ice. And don't worry. But don't forget, either. Something's bound to happen someday. I want you to be ready."

Then he squirmed into the cockpit to brood. Every few seconds, in a motion he seemed powerless to control, his tongue dragged across the jagged fragment of his broken tooth and probed its soft, ultra-sensitive center. And every time he did that his head shivered with a pain of almost stunning intensity. And each time he felt that exquisite pain he vowed never to do it again. But he couldn't stop himself, no matter how hard he tried, no matter how bad the pain got. Amazing, he thought.

Absolutely amazing.

About a year later they had a little party. The computer had said: ten years to go.

"Ten years till *what*?" asked Ice, teasing.

The twins were seven-and-a-half—a pair of loud-mouthed *runts*.

That day Eismann told them about the journey to Alpha Centauri. But they'd known all along (computer Q&A).

They knew about *everything*.

Ice said, "Got the latest update, Eismann. At our present rate of growth, the water reserve will become critical in five-and-a-half to six years."

"I can hardly wait."

Kathy wouldn't talk about it, but neither would she cry.

Ice said, "Me and Kathy are supposed to keep Mankind alive."

"It's a big responsibility."

Ice laughed, echoing Eismann's short, ironic chirp. "Maybe not."

"What do you mean?"

Ice toyed with one of the spherical "cupcakes" Eismann had struggled to bake for the celebration. The sugar-coated globe wobbled as it spun, a bite out of one side. "The thing is," said Ice, "nobody asked *us*. What if we don't want to?"

Eismann shrugged. This was not the time to argue about it. So the kid had doubts.

Welcome to the club.

They spent a lot of time, singly and in groups, watching TV and movies on the monitor. Nearly a quarter of the inventory was available to them, the rest in "deep storage" (a phrase that continued to infuriate Eismann every time it appeared on the computer screen).

The twins liked the old movies best—westerns like *Red River* and *The Wild Bunch*, war flicks like *Casablanca* and *A Guy Named Joe*, comedies like *The Philadelphia Story* and *The Awful Truth*. These were Eismann's favorites, the ones he always used to watch on the late show on TV back in the World. The twins took to them automatically.

They had little interest in the more modern stuff, the porno snuff comedies of the '90s, or the early made-in-space spectacles from the turn of the century.

Their TV selections were likewise vintage: "Leave It To Beaver," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," and "Spuds Pozo!"—all shows that were already in reruns when Eismann was a kid. The newer stuff just didn't captivate them.

Maybe the twins were getting a biased notion of what the world had been like; maybe they were learning it was a better place than it had been. So what? They'd need all the optimism they could get when they set out to build a new world.

If, thought Eismann, this little experiment lasts that long.

He understood now that the sleepbox had been designed to do more than preserve his vitality and conserve the consumables. According to the flight-plan he'd have come awake with very little time left and a hell of a lot to do. He was supposed to be far too busy to think. Too busy to *doubt*.

But the landing was still eight years off.

One "game" they played was called Shuttle Landing. They took turns going through the computer simulations, responding to mock emergencies, scoping out hypothetical landing sites, gaining points toward a goal of "Safe Landing."

Kathy was the best "pilot"—a fearless barnstormer. It even began to look as if the twins *could* handle the landing by themselves.

Of course the transition to "real" time was a killer, but Eismann knew that there was precedent. Ninety years earlier, when aircraft were single-seaters, would-be pilots packed what advice they could carry and went up to solo on the first try. If they crashed, they flunked.

If Kathy crashed the shuttle . . . Man flunked out forever.

Still, it was the only chance. . . .

When he was ten-and-a-half, Ice came to him and said: "You screwed up, Eismann."

"That right?"

"Kathy and me should never have been born."

"Don't be pessimistic," said Eismann dryly. But how could they *not* be, living with him. "All the eggs were spoiling. I had to do something."

"You could have opened the egg storage compartment to vacuum and kept it in the shade. They'd have kept frozen, you know."

Eismann just stared at him.

"You could've kept *all* the eggs frozen until we got to Alpha Centauri. That way we wouldn't have the water problem, you know?"

Eismann knew, and his face grew hot with realization of what he'd done. He'd doomed them all—almost certainly—by setting up this train of events. Sure, there'd been a bombing—that wasn't his fault. But his first reaction at that moment of crisis was wrong. He'd had other options. Christ, it might even have been possible to reactivate his sleepbox.

There was no point in trying now. It was too late, and he had

the twins to look after. His children. His doomed children. Some goddamn Nanny he'd turned out to be.

He didn't have to say a thing. He could tell by the amused expression on Ice's young face that he'd been caught. One more thing to think about in the horrible years to come.

Ice floated away. He never mentioned it again.

On their fourteenth birthday the twins came to him with a plan.

Eismann was edgy. He exercised one hour three times a day, checked the water level *four*. Soon, soon . . .

There'd been no more of the promised "bombs" in the system. Maybe the threat was an exercise in psychological warfare.

He stayed alert. The next critical phase was coming . . .

"Listen to this," Ice said. "In fifteen months or so we'll begin our deceleration burn, right?"

"I told you not to use that word," Eismann said. "There is no moon; there are no *months*!"

Ice looked at Kathy and smiled. "If I say one and a quarter *years* he'll just say—"

"Get on with it!" Eismann said. He was nervous.

Ice explained slowly. They—the twins—were afraid of the coming deceleration. Afraid of the one-tenth gee bogey man that had been coming to get them all of their lives. Nothing they had read or dreamed about gravity, real or artificial, had made them eager to experience its unrelenting grip. They wanted no part of it.

"You can handle it."

"We can *learn* to," said Ice, "if we must. But we'll never make it on a planet, Eismann. Never."

But they had a plan.

And the Iceman wept when he heard it.

"You have to promise," said Ice, staring hard at him, staring right through him to where the heart of doubt and fear stirred miserably.

Kathy nodded. "You have to."

Eismann felt himself dwindling beneath the force of their commitment and the somber weight of their sacrifice. There was no way out. He whispered, "I promise."

IV

It was close, but they made it. And Eismann got to keep both

his legs. Ice was right; he'd need them.

The shuttle was already within the orbit of Alpha Centauri B and closing in on the A star, the heavier of the two. B had passed apastron before the mission was launched, and now was still poking along the slow side of its eighty-year orbit.

(The C star, also called Proxima Centauri, was way the hell off somewhere, and in any case was not under consideration as a suitable star.)

Alpha Centauri A got picked mainly because it was currently closer. It was also pure yellow again, now that the ship had lost nearly all of its wavelength-shifting speed.

Eismann turned forward in the observation bubble and looked back along the way he'd come.

Sol was the brightest star in Cassiopeia.

Eismann dropped down into the main room. He was well used to the one-tenth gee thrust (used even to living on the back wall), and he was anxious to get even heavier. His muscle tone was good (he'd worked long enough getting it), and his bone calcium was fair.

He was sixty-two—a skinny, bald old man. He felt great.

His brood looked up as he hit the wall (floor).

A dozen babies, ranging in age from one month to one year.

All the children of Ice and Kathy—and twenty more in the wombs.

All parentless now, except for their aging Nanny.

Ice's plan was simple and inevitable.

The twins would never live to walk the new planet—should one be discovered—but their children could. Their children, most of them, would be born in the planet's gravitational field. A dozen more would be brought there at a very early age—and out of an already one-tenth gee inertial field. Most would adapt easily.

And Eismann must be ready to land and attempt the adaptation to full gravity. It was—after all—his job, his mission.

Ice and Kathy matured and supplied the fertilized eggs for the twenty wombs. (Eismann never discussed sex with either of the twins, but he agreed—gratefully—to Kathy's request for a private corner. Ice took full charge of the tricky egg gathering phase, acting quite dispassionately. The Iceman saw his unconscious tutoring at work here—and it scared him . . . but in other areas the twins proved remarkably warm and generous. Eismann hoped he'd contributed some part of this, too.)

The twins were of slight build, Kathy too frail even to bear her

own children. It was probably a miracle she matured sexually at all. But then, she *had* to.

They both suffered quietly in the one-tenth gee deceleration field. Kathy, especially—her broken femor had not set properly. When Eismann watched her limping and saw the unconscious grimace of pain that tightened her pretty face, he wanted to cry.

Have I done *anything* right? he asked himself. Anything at all?

"Here comes old Gimpy," she'd say, bouncing off the floor. She'd laugh and Eismann would think of Kathy, his Kathy. They looked the same in his mind now, indistinguishable, equally loved, equally mourned.

I'm haunted by a trillion trillion ghosts, he thought. The ghost of every creature that leapt, swam, or crawled on a dead planet once called, briefly, Earth.

There are a million ghosts in orbit around every cell of my body. I am aswarm with the dead.

On some days he felt very . . . *thick*.

Before the end, as the water level sank below the minimum, sacrifices had to be made. It was agreed both that Eismann should remain whole and that the fetuses be given priority in the fight for protoplasm. The twins gave up their almost useless legs.

Then, the final egg implanted, they gave up everything else. They went together.

Eismann was three AUs from Alpha Centauri A when he spotted the planet.

Automatic equipment monitored A and B and predicted planets by orbital perturbations. Eismann looked where the computer told him and there it was—1.04 AUs from the A star, moving in a rather complicated series of precessing ellipses. Eccentricity of the orbits varied, but even the worst-case prediction from the computer was acceptable.

Besides: green forests and blue oceans under cloudy but transparent skies. And oxygen . . . yes, it would do.

The ten-to-one longshot had paid off.

Eismann made a slight course change—the third in as many days—then held his breath and shut down the main drive. He spent several nervous hours manipulating the remaining plasma of anti-matter fuel (using the remotes, of course). The ejection capsule used the fuel to power the electro-magnetic bubble that kept the anti-matter isolated. When the fuel ran out, the field

would collapse—but by then there should be little anti-matter left. Just enough to blow the capsule to pieces.

Eismann watched the beacons capsule accelerate away from the shuttle. He hoped nobody would come across it before the anti-matter was gone—it was a hell of a discourteous package to leave drifting about.

Far too dangerous to risk bringing to the planet with him. Unless—

That would be funny, he thought. If the whole damned planet was made of anti-matter—what a great joke on me!

Rather unlikely now: if the planet were anti-matter it would be almost certain the suns were too. But the shuttle was already caught in the swirl of their stellar winds. If those particles were anti-matter, his ship would have been eaten away by micro-detonnations by now.

So—not to worry. Plenty of other problems to keep him occupied.

The planet was coming up rapidly. There was only going to be one landing attempt, anti-matter or no. There wasn't enough fuel left to orbit the planet—the bomb-induced course corrections eighteen years ago had seen to that—no time to scour the planet for safe landing sites. Or airports . . .

On the last day Eismann lit off the main chemical engines and emptied the propellant tanks in less than three minutes. After that there was barely enough time to get the shuttle turned for a head-first entry. He was coming in too damned fast, but there was nothing he could do about that now. He'd have to dive right into the atmosphere and skip his momentum away.

Too deep a bite, and that would be it—meteor time. Too shallow and he'd skip right back out, on his merry way to nowhere. Eismann gnawed nervously on his plastic teething ring. Then he grinned.

Here's where I earn all that back flight-pay.

Well, not quite yet—computers were still running the show. The shuttle pitched slowly upward until Eismann could no longer see the planet out his cockpit window. The sky was black and sprinkled with constellations, their patterns familiar, yet slightly distorted. He was not so *very* far from home.

It was peaceful up there. The only sounds were those of air fans and the hiss of an ink-jet printer making hard-copy log entries. Eismann tightened his harness straps, eager for something to do.

There was still no sense of motion, save the flickering read-outs of the radar altimeters. The radios were quiet, so far.

All the Space Traffic Controllers must be on strike, he thought. He started to laugh, then stopped.

I'm an old man, he thought suddenly. Too old to start something like this.

The shuttle quivered, and a ripple of fear swept his body. A row of white and green status lights flickered amber for a moment, then settled down.

Eismann shut his eyes and listened to the rush of surging blood in his ears. *I am* too old for this.

In fact, he thought, I am the oldest living astronaut.

Hell, I'm the oldest living *anything*.

And I don't want to die. Not now, not after—

The shuttle shook and bounced, porpoising on the invisible, almost nonexistent air. Alarms gonged softly; again the board lit up red. Two control computers overloaded and shut down; they tried to reset, failed, and put themselves on hold.

That's the plan, he thought abruptly and with horrible certainty. The final "bomb" in the system. They'd rigged the shuttle computers to blow the landing. So close and yet—

Eismann reached out and took the stick.

The shuttle reacted badly to his touch, yawing immediately to port and beginning a slow clockwise roll. By the time he'd corrected the ship's attitude his whole body shook with every thudding heartbeat.

My God, I am going to die. We are all going to die.

I should not be in this pilot's seat, he thought desperately. Kathy was twice the pilot I was.

Which Kathy? Either one, damn it.

Both dead now, what does it matter?

(And I am escaped alone to tell thee.)

Christ, I *am* the survivor-type all right. But the best man doesn't always win, brother. There are other factors.

(They couldn't take the chance drugs or poisons would contaminate the water supply as their tiny legless bodies entered the system. "There is no other way," said Kathy, turning her back, offering her frail neck to his muscular hands. It was worse than he could have imagined. And afterward . . .)

The best Men he'd ever known—Kathy and Ice—were dead. He'd seen to it. The hell with logic. *He'd* killed them, just as he'd killed Kathy, his Kathy.

And now he'd finish the job, wreck the shuttle, and kill them all. Kill himself, kill the babies, kill Man.

All he had to do was nudge the stick downward a half centimeter.

Is this why they chose me?

If the babies knew, if they understood . . .

(The babies were strapped each-to-each like link sausages and tucked into his sleepbox. If they cried he couldn't hear them. They trusted him.)

We could die now and no one would ever know, he thought.

But the shuttle steadied up and straddled its imaginary flight line. He was still in control—for the moment. No "bombs," just nerves.

The atmosphere was thicker up there than expected. Maybe there'd been a lot of stellar activity lately, warming up the air and pumping it higher. The first of how many surprises?

He began to torture himself with a litany of possible disasters.

What if there's no ozone layer? The ultra-violet will cut me to pieces. Or what if the soil kills all my seeds? And what if the native plants are inedible or poisonous? Or what if the air is crowded with lethal bacteria or viruses? Or the forests thick with ravenous beasts? What if I trip over my shoelaces and bust my skull?

The shuttle vibrated harshly in the thickening air. The sky was blue-black, the stars hazy. Daylight failed quickly as the shuttle raced into the night side of the planet. The red-orange glow of the heatshield tiles blossomed ominously around the windows.

Within minutes he was in the shadow of the planet, and all he could see was the ship on fire. His hand tensed on the stick.

I used to like this part, he thought. Flying . . .

Flying the shuttle, flying *anything*. But that's all over now. This will be the last time, the last flight.

For twenty-two years Man had been an interstellar race—for the duration of this one voyage. Man at his apex.

In half an hour the Space Age would be over, the Dark Ages re-begun. Or maybe there'd be . . . nothing.

The final flight.

All those years of training—of playing the Game with Ice and Kathy—they would all pay off in the next few minutes. Or not.

He saw their faces, their smiling, determined faces. They wanted this to happen. They'd given up everything for this to happen, sacrificed everything so Eismann could put his cargo safely on the ground of this new planet. Why?

What did they know about Man? How could they care about His preservation? The only man they ever knew was Eismann. What about him convinced them Man was worthy of staying alive?

Nothing, he thought. Not a damned thing.

No, they did it for *me*. So *I* could live. So I could pace the fresh earth of this new planet, chomping on my silly plastic pacifier, watching their children grow up.

They did it for their old Nanny.

It was *personal*.

Then Eismann realized why he couldn't waggle the stick and end the Final Flight in a futile blaze of light. It was personal. He had a cargo to deliver, the precious children of his oldest friends. He had *promised* them, and now he'd have to keep his promise—even if no one would ever know.

Especially if no one ever knew.

It was something Men did.

Eismann wiped his eyes. The fiery glow of the shuttle's nose and belly flared brightly and the cockpit groaned and muttered. Cooling fans picked up the pace. They were still fifty miles high.

"I'll do my job," he said. "I'll make you proud, or rip my guts out trying."

I'm one hell of a meteor, he thought suddenly, as he blazed across the night sky.

I wonder who's watching? I wonder what they think?

Invaders from Earth, coming to *get'cha*. One bald old Nanny and his vicious gang of Earth babies.

God help you, here we come. ●



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ON BOOKS

by Norman Spinrad

As I write this, nearly half the hardcover bestseller list is occupied by novels that have some affinity for what in the broadest terms we generally consider "SF." In 1982, four straightforward science fiction novels by four unequivocal science fiction writers—Frank Herbert, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert A. Heinlein—made the bestseller lists and have stayed there for varying runs. A fifth, *Battlefield Earth*, by L. Ron Hubbard, may make it yet. In addition, we have *Deadeye Dick* by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., a novelist who has spent so much time and energy denying his SF connection that everyone thinks he doth protest far too much. James Michener's #1 bestseller *Space* is self-explanatory and is doing almost as well on the SF bestseller list on the national lists. And of course, no national bestseller list is complete these days without at least one novel by Stephen King, this year's winner of the non-fiction Hugo. Anthony Burgess has a new SF novel coming out in the spring, Doris Lessing seems to have

long since become a science fiction writer, Norman Mailer is working on one, and we can be sure that the trend will continue.

It's no longer a fantasy. "SF"—at least in the extended sense—is beginning to take over as a dominant trend in the commerce of fiction publishing. Now that it's happened, we really shouldn't be too surprised, seeing how "SF" has long since taken over Hollywood, to the point where "SF" related pictures have accounted for about 40 percent of the film industry's gross in 1982.

At the same time, however, *Harper's* magazine has published a shrill and hydrophobic attack on science fiction in general by a person of no critical or literary standing anywhere, the main thrust of which is that science fiction is rubbish *because* it is becoming commercially dominant. And unconfirmable intelligence has it that the editorial board of the flagship publication of the "New York Literary Establishment" held a meeting at which they formally decided not to cover SF.

Suddenly these people seem to have woken up to find that the SF barbarians are not merely at the gates but have started to take over the Board of Directors. The self-appointed champions of "serious literature" obviously feel financially threatened by SF because it is selling and *their* genre isn't, and hasn't been for quite some time.

But if that were all there was to it, one would expect to find them even more exercised over the commercial success of the Romance genre, which is doing even better, financially speaking. No, if the *Harper's* piece makes one thing perfectly clear, it is that what the New York Literary Establishment finds uniquely threatening about science fiction is its powerful combination of commercial viability with serious literary ambition (at least in certain quarters), along with the growing academic acceptance of same. What they fear, what they see happening, is the practical fulfillment in publishing and critical reality of what John W. Campbell declared on an absolute theoretical level decades ago: "*Science fiction* is the generality, the literary mainstream, being the fiction of all possible times and realities, past, present, and future. Contemporary fiction is a restricted and special case of science fiction, being fiction confined to the 'real

world' and the immediate present."

Yet at the same time, *within* the SF genre, there is a growing discontent with the literary quality of science fiction, with the level of literary ambition of the genre as a whole, which, it cannot be denied, gives ample ammunition to those who would attack it on literary grounds from without. In this regard, we sometimes seem to be our own worst enemies.

The problem is that the "SF genre" contains within basically the same packaging, marketing parameters, indeed within the same lines edited by the same editors, works of wildly varying levels of not only literary skill but of literary ambition, not merely of accomplishment, but of intent.

Indeed, when it comes to anthologies, you can sometimes see widely varying levels of literary ambition within the cover of a single book. For instance, *Yesterday's Tomorrows* edited by Frederick Pohl (Berkley, \$9.95), is a compendium, complete with fascinating autobiographical material, of Pohl's 40-year career as a science fiction editor. With a forty-year universe of stories and novels that he originally bought to choose from, one might have expected Pohl to put together the literary *crème de la crème* of the genre, or contrariwise, a self-revealing anthology of pulp-

level trivia; at any rate, a definitive picture of Pohl's level of literary ambition as an editor.

Instead we have a book that would certainly bewilder an outside critic trying to form a coherent picture of what science fiction is all about through the taste of one of the main editors of the past forty years. There are obvious classics of serious literary intent like Clarke's "The Nine Billion Names of God," "Slow Tuesday Night" by R.A. Lafferty, "The Ballad of Lost C'mell" by Cordwainer Smith, and "The Moon Moth" by Jack Vance. There are somewhat more obscure stories on the same level like "At the Mouse Circus" by Harlan Ellison, and "Guinevere for Everybody" by Jack Williamson. But the entire oeuvre of one of the best short story writers the field has ever produced, Roger Zelazny, is represented by a piece of fluff called "The Great Slow Kings," Philip K. Dick is represented by "Oh, to be a Blobel!", a title which speaks for itself, James Tiptree, Jr. by a really minor work, and Larry Niven by a story which leads up to a scientific curiosity punchline which has since been proven to be scientifically wrong. Pohl's career as an editor of novels is represented by excerpts from Delany's masterwork *Dhalgren* and Gustav Hasford's fine Viet Nam novel

The Short-Timers, but also by David A. Kyle's smarmy and truly embarrassing introduction to *Dragon Lensman*, his "Doc Smith" pastiche.

What does it all add up to? A representative outsize issue of *Galaxy* or *If* combined with slices of a "balanced list" of SF novels—anything but a coherent literary testament displaying the best of what Fred Pohl has stood for in his literary heart of hearts. Unless this book is *precisely* what Pohl stands for: science fictional subject matter written on every conceivable level of literary ambition and skill.

The situation seems little changed in Alan Ryan's *Perpetual Light* (Warner, \$3.95), a timewise slice of SF, an anthology of original stories on the subject of God and religion. In his introduction, Ryan lays out a thesis of high philosophical seriousness and literary intent: "Speculative fiction . . . seems to me eminently well suited to examine the questions raised by thoughtful people about God and religion. . . . Certainly religion has provided the subject matter for some of the best writing the field of science fiction has ever produced."

Undeniably true. Alas, religion has also provided the subject matter for some of the silliest and most trivial writing the

field has ever produced as well. *Perpetual Light* provides a fair sampling of both. An outside critic seeking to prove that SF is capable of philosophical depth and serious literary intent could mine plenty of evidence from this book. But a critic seeking to point out that SF handles the grand themes with gimmick stories and trivial pratfalls could also select stories from *Perpetual Light* to prove his case. Once again, we have a "balanced list" of the jejune and the sublime published side by side as exactly the same thing, namely "SF."

All too frequently these days, we find the two streams contained within the oeuvre of the same science fiction writer. Somtow Sucharitkul is an excellent case in point. Readers of this magazine will no doubt be familiar with the stories contained in *Mallworld* (Donning, \$5.95), a series of somewhat arch entertainments taking place in a giant shopping mall floating in space. Light, fun reading in its way, and not something to be inherently ashamed of. But compare this to the subtlety, depth, and literary intent of Sucharitkul's first novel, *Starship & Haiku* (Timescape), which he was apparently writing at the same time, and you wish that the real Somtow Sucharitkul would please stand up.

Of course even such a writer

as Graham Greene self-consciously divides his own oeuvre into "serious novels" and "entertainments" and as long as a writer can keep the two levels separate within his own head, there's really nothing wrong with pursuing two different literary careers on two different levels of literary ambition. It's when the two levels start getting confused, as they have in Sucharitkul's second novel, *Light on the Sound* (Timescape, \$2.95), that a fine talent starts to get into career trouble.

Light on the Sound displays a maturation of what Sucharitkul showed in *Starship & Haiku*: great and bizarre inventiveness, considerable psychological depth, and an at times dazzling prose style. But it is also intended as the first book in a trilogy. The result is that the satisfyingly intricate and well-thought-out multiplex plot, instead of reaching the artistically satisfying resolution that the level of ambition the body of the novel is pointing to and demands, fizzles out in the end into a set-up for the next slice of the series.

What a writer like Sucharitkul needs at this stage in his career is editorial guidance of some idealism which would delineate the difference between entertainments designed to build audience and sales, and novelistic structure suitable to the works of serious literary in-

tent of which he is clearly capable and which he shows some ambition of attempting. Instead what we have is a first novelist of great promise being steered into the production of second, third, and fourth novels which seem likely to turn into the usual melange of high literary technique harnessed to the production of a science fiction adventure series hopelessly confused as to level of literary intent.

For a look at where this leads to at a more mature stage in the career of a science fiction writer of genuine literary talent, and, at least an initially high level of literary ambition, consider the career of Roger Zelazny.

At the beginning of his career, Zelazny was justly acknowledged as one of the finest short story writers ever to work in the SF genre, and his early novels represented the achievements of his short fiction writ large. Then he achieved his largest commercial (and to some extent critical) success with *Lord of Light*, a kind of science fantasy retelling of Buddhist mythology. From there to a series of novels giving the same treatment to other mythic cycles, and from that to doing likewise with mythic cycles of his own devising, culminating, perhaps, in the "Amber" series. Although he was also attempting more serious work during this period, it seemed somehow

contaminated by the bad habits of his mythic "entertainments." His production of fine short stories fell off, and today the general critical wisdom within the genre is that Zelazny has become a writer who somehow has failed to live up to his early promise, and one who no longer is considered to have "serious literary ambition" by those who consider such things at all.

His latest novel, *Eye of Cat* (Timescape, \$13.95), though, seems to be at least a partially successful attempt to get back to his original roots via a backwards recapitulation of the process within one novel. He starts out with another mythic cycle, in this case that of the Navajo, transmogrified into a science fictional future via the vehicle of his protagonist, a Navajo hunter and tracker of alien creatures. William Blackhorse Singer contracts for the aid of an old alien enemy to defeat another set of alien baddies in the first third of the novel, and for his part of the bargain, is tracked by his temporary ally in roughly the middle half. But this plot, like the first one, peters out towards the final quarter of the novel, which then concludes as a kind of mystic, transcendental quest in which, passing through a symbolist landscape, Singer attempts to fuse his two personas—the "Last Navajo" and the modern man — into a wholistic unity.

The "novel" reads like three somewhat discontinuous novellas—which apparently is *not* how it was written—and if it were not for this structural arbitrariness, it would be fair to say that Zelazny had succeeded in putting it all back together. Indeed, one could read it as a paradigm of Zelazny-the-writer-of-science-fictionalized-myth and Zelazny-the-science-fiction-writer-of-literary-ambition attempting to fuse his own two personas back into a unified whole via this very novel. At the very least, *Eye of Cat* refocuses sharpened interest on what Zelazny will produce next.

Finally, to crystallize what is meant by level of literary ambition as opposed to level of skill and how widely it can vary within SF, let us compare two polar opposites: L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth* (St. Martin's, \$24.00) and Gene Wolfe's "Book of the New Sun" tetralogy, now completed with the publication of *The Citadel of the Autarch* (Timescape, \$14.95). Curiously enough, Hubbard's huge 430,000-word single novel is just about as long as Wolfe's four-book series. Curiously enough, both *Battlefield Earth* and *Citadel*, taken as the culmination of the Wolfe tetralogy, are probably prime candidates for the same awards. Also curiously, both the Wolfe and the Hubbard are marketed as the same thing,

namely "SF," and are quite likely to be perceived as such, given the ignorance of sufficient distance, such as that of the New York Literary Establishment.

But I'm sure that both Wolfe and Hubbard, if put together in the same room, could readily and amiably agree that they were not trying to do the same thing at all.

Hubbard, one of the mainstays of the early Campbell "Golden Age," is of course the founder of Scientology, and as such has been inactive as a science fiction writer for decades. He dedicates *Battlefield Earth* to "... all the merry crew of science fiction writers of the thirties and forties. . . ." whom he proceeds to name at length, and in his introduction forthrightly states that in those days he saw SF as a species of adventure fiction which he wrote to support his "serious research," and that *Battlefield Earth* is intended to contain "... practically every type of (pulp) story there is—detective, spy, adventure, western, love, air war, you name it."

Thus Hubbard clearly states the level of literary ambition of *Battlefield Earth* and can only be judged on the extent to which he achieves what he set out to do. The novel is twice as long as it should be, but then Hubbard also states that one of his ambitions was to write the

longest SF novel ever. *Battlefield Earth* is in fact a melange of every conceivable 1930s pulp adventure genre, and the shallow characterization, rambling recursive plot, extensive padding, and merely serviceable prose shows it. By modern SF standards, it is pretty bad. But then Hubbard's ambition was *not* to write modern SF of some literary ambition but to reproduce exactly what he and others were doing in the 1930s, and by those standards he has succeeded. By those standards, even the shameless padding is virtue, since adventure magazine writers were paid by the word. Moreover, the novel takes itself not at all seriously; it is full of quite intentional humor, even to the extent of allowing an 819-page action adventure novel to climax in a series of outrageous cosmic comic pratfalls.

Gene Wolfe has nowhere published as clear a statement of level of literary intent as Hubbard, but his whole career as a craftsman of lapidary prose, thematic ambiguity, psychological depth, and Borgesian non-standardly-plotted story structures is statement enough. Up until "The Book of the New Sun," Wolfe labored in relative obscurity, content, from all appearances, to produce caviar of the highest literary intent for the cognoscenti rather than adventure for the SF masses.

The Shadow of the Torturer,

the first book in the series, narrating the tale of Severian the apprentice torturer who becomes autarch of Earth from the sensibility of that future self, successfully continues that tradition, while at the same time, with its wonderful set-up of a bizarre science fantasy universe, promises a masterwork which will fuse highest literary ambition with crowd-pleasing, in the manner of Dickens.

The Citadel of the Autarch, the concluding volume (although apparently there will be some kind of fifth volume), delivers the twin resolutions of what was set up in the first, in that Severian becomes autarch, the nature of the promised "New Sun" is revealed, and in the bargain the "scientific rationale" behind what has seemed more or less like fantasy is artfully and stepwise revealed.

Yet somehow the totality is not entirely satisfying. The problem lies in the middle two volumes, *The Claw of the Conciliator* and *The Sword of the Lictor*. In terms of advancing and deepening the plot and thematic material, they are almost entirely superfluous. They are padding, like so much of *Battlefield Earth*; though far more elegant padding than Hubbard's, since Wolfe's ambitious and intrinsically fascinating prose style never lets down, and since he seems capable of cre-

ating endless scenes, incidents, and even self-contained digressory stories which hold the interest as they are read even if they do not really advance the story.

Indeed, Wolfe does this so well that if *Citadel of the Autarch* delivered what *Shadow of the Torturer* promised, he could be forgiven the self-indulgence of the middle volumes—since they are not boring in themselves—and the total work could fairly be judged a masterwork which successfully fulfills Wolfe's unquestionably high literary ambition.

Alas, the love of gigantism which afflicts Hubbard also afflicts Wolfe, and in the case of "The Book of the New Sun," in which what should have been a single large novel is padded out into a tetralogy so that the same total wordage can fetch a total cover price more than twice what Hubbard commands for a single volume of the same length, it ultimately mars the structure of the whole in general and the denouement in particular. Severian's character does not develop from naive young torturer into a personality fit to rule the Earth; instead he goes through about 200,000 words worth of adventures and then becomes autarch much the way an indigent becomes a millionaire by winning a lottery. The "Coming of the New Sun," with its punning

reference to the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time, especially when linked from the outset to the eventual raising of the protagonist to Glory, in the end is revealed as nothing more multi-resonant than the astrophysical renovation of a dying star.

Thus *Battlefield Earth* and "The Book of the New Sun" reveal the ultimate paradox sheltered under the umbrella of "SF." Wolfe and Hubbard have both written "SF" of comparable length, and the percentage of padding is about the same too. By any absolute literary standard, Wolfe has written a much better work, for he has partially succeeded in living up to a much higher level of literary intent. Yet, when measured by the quite different standards each writer has set for himself, Hubbard is more "successful" than Wolfe, both by the closeness with which he approaches his own paradigm of "SF" and by the fact that he will no doubt sell many more books.

If there existed in an overall American literary culture, an overarching standard of "absolute literary value" whereby all "SF" could be measured by absolute literary achievement rather than by the degree to which a given work fulfills its author's level of literary ambition, then Wolfe's flawed work would be judged more "success-

ful" than Hubbard's.

But since what attempts to pass for overall American literary culture eschews the serious consideration of SF, such works are left to the schizoid

internal standards of the SF genre. Perhaps it's time critics working *within* the SF genre attempted to do something about this. It seems unlikely that anyone else will. ●

As long-time readers of the magazine may know, once a year, Baird Searles, our regular book reviewer, takes a month off for a well-deserved rest. We'd like to thank Norman Spinrad for providing such an entertaining and thought-provoking substitute.



NEXT ISSUE

The August *Asfm* will feature "The Peacemaker," a new story by Gardner Dozois. This moving tale, set in a flood-wracked United States, will have a cover by illustrator Vai Lakey Lindahn. We'll also have an intriguing short story by John Sladek, "Scenes from the Country of the Blind," and exciting works by Michael P. Kube-McDowell, James Patrick Kelly, and others. Pick up your copy, on sale July 5, 1983.

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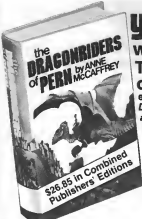
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1-5—**ConStellation**, Box 1046, Baltimore MD 21203. John Brunner, David (Lensman) Kyle, Jack (Well of Souls) Chalker. The 1983 WorldCon. Join by July 15 for \$40, or pay more at the door.

AUGUST, 1984

30-Sep. 3—**LACon 3**, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. Anaheim CA. The '84 WorldCon. \$40.



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